



Tim Sullivan

TO CONQUER THE THRONE

TOR'

ATOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK

Chapter 1

Gabriella Nicks saw the flash of laser fire and heard screaming coming from outside her first-floor flat. She flung herself behind an overstuffed chair, scraping her knees as a standing lamp toppled to the hardwood floor, casting bizarre shadows about the room. As she crouched in fear, Gabriella smelled smoke and heard alarms ringing in the damp London night. She prayed that the police would hurry as a shadow fell across a casement. Someone was coming towards her door!

Scrambling across the carpet, she tried to get to the door before the intruder. She flung herself against the solid oak and fumbled with the latch, certain that she had left it unlocked. Her heart nearly burst when the pounding started a moment later. She looked around for a chair to

jam under the doorknob when she heard a familiar voice, muffled through the oaken portal.

“Gabby!” the voice shouted.

For a moment, she didn’t say anything. Heart pounding, her body pressed against the door, Gabriella thought she was hallucinating. No, it was Nigel. She would know his voice anywhere.

She tore the latch away and unlocked the door. Nigel Smythe-Walmsley, scion of one of the oldest families in Britain, sagged against her and fell inside onto the carpet.

Gabriella bent over his bloodied form, trying to help Nigel. He appeared to be both cut and burnt.

“Nigel, what’s happened to you?” she said.

“The door ...” Nigel flailed weakly towards the darkness beyond the threshold. A tendril of fog crept inside before Gabriella was able to slam the door shut with a

resounding crack.

She hurried back to Nigel, cradling his head in her arms.

“I’m going to call a doctor,” she said.

“No!” Nigel gasped, his handsome, pale face distorted in agony. He clutched her wrist. “They’ll be able to trace me if you do that.”

Gabriella stared at his sweating, bruised face. She had assumed Nigel to be an innocent bystander up to now, just popping in to see her when this violence erupted on the street. Upon renting these rooms from a minor canon at St. Paul’s, she’d been told it was one of the quietest districts in London. Perhaps no neighborhood was safe now that the Visitors were here. But that sentiment didn’t explain Nigel’s predicament. If he was coming to see her, why hadn’t he rung her up beforehand?

“Nigel, are you ...” She couldn’t bring herself to finish, what with all the dangers implicit in what she was thinking.

“Yes, I’m in the resistance,” he told her quite simply.

She hugged him to her bosom. “Oh, Nigel, how could you get involved in something like that?” Hot tears welled up from under her eyelids and rolled down her cheeks.

“What choice did I have? Those frightful reptiles are destroying the land of my ancestors. England is no longer free, Gabriella.”

“I know, but it can’t last forever. There’s the Red Dust toxin.”

“Not good enough. England’s climate is mild enough for them to survive . . . and they’re developing methods to resist the toxin even as we speak.”

Nigel coughed up blood-flecked spittle. It occurred to Gabriella that he could die right here if she didn’t get him some help. She had to take him to a hospital. But she knew how stubborn he could be . . . stubborn enough to let himself die, she feared. Nevertheless, she must try to reason with him.

“We have got to get you to a physician,” she said firmly, “no matter what. You

could **die**, Nigel.”

“We must all die, at some juncture.”

“Stop being so noble and philosophical, and cooperate with me.”

But Nigel’s head was lolling in such a way that she feared he couldn’t hear her at all anymore. “Nigel!” she cried.

He groaned, his eyes opening a little as he tried to look at her. He couldn’t seem to focus very well, but at least he was still alive.

At that moment, a knock sounded loudly on the door.

“Open up,” a hissing voice commanded. “Open up in the name of Her Majesty.”

“It’s the Visitors,” Nigel gasped. “They must have been searching the surrounding buildings all this time.”

“Well, they aren’t coming in here,” Gabriella said. “I’m an American, and I’m not subject to the laws of the Queen or the Visitors.”

“Out the back way, Gabby,” Nigel said. “They probably don’t know about the courtyard.” “Have you taken leave of your senses, Nigel? I can’t leave you here alone, with those creatures swarming around outside.”

“You must. There is no sense in both of us dying. I can’t escape, Gabby. You can get away to carry on the fight for both of us.”

She started to protest, but a flash of blue laser fire and the smell of burnt oak silenced her. The

Visitors were going to come in, one way or another.

Nigel was still now, and she looked into his eyes. She saw no recognition there; nor was there any fear. There was nothing at all. Nigel was dead, but she couldn’t quite believe it. Perhaps if she said the right thing, or kissed Mm . . .

But there was no time. A cobalt beam slashed through the door and cut a vase in half on a table across the room. They would be inside in seconds.

“Good-bye, Nigel,” she said, kissing him gently on the lips. She laid his head carefully on the floor and rose, not looking back. She heard the big oaken front door crash onto the floor as she slipped out the back and hurried away from her beleaguered apartment on Amen Court and into the shadow of St. Paul’s Cathedral.

Chapter 2

In a small room on the grounds of Davies, Lang and Dick, Gabriella Nicks sat drinking a cup of tea. She had made her way in the fog along Tottenham Court Road to the tube. Then she rode the train all night long, fearing the crimson-clad Visitors who got on and off at virtually every stop. She thought their human disguises were even more disturbing than their scaly, green faces, and they invariably wore them when in London. At dawn she got off at Holland Park Station and made her way to a restaurant for breakfast and then walked to the “crammer,” as Davies, Lang and Dick was known.

Her friend Robert Walters had arrived a little before eight, and she had spirited him away from his classroom to tell him what had happened.

“Gabby, this is terrible,” Robert said. “Absolutely dreadful. Are you sure Nigel’s dead?” “I’m absolutely certain, Robert.” Tears sprang to her eyes at the memory. In a way it hardly seemed real, and yet there was no doubt that it had happened.

“There, there, darling,” Robert said, producing a handkerchief. “I’m awfully sorry.” Through her tears, Gabriella said, “I’m more than sorry, Robert. I’m angry as hell, and I’m not going to let them get away with it.”

“Spoken like the spunky American girl you are, my dear.”

In spite of her grief, Gabriella managed to smile a little. “I suppose I do sound a little like John Wayne, don’t I?”

“A little. More tea?”

“No, I’ve got to admit I really don’t care for the stuff. Have you got any root beer?”

“Root beer? I’m afraid the only alcoholic beverage I have is a bit of sherry.”

“Root beer isn’t alcoholic, Robert. It’s a soft drink, like cola.”

“Really? Odd that it’s called beer, then.” “Well, you have cider with alcohol in it.” “Doesn’t everyone?”

“Not in the good old U. S. of A. It’s more of a fruit juice, unfermented.”

“Good heavens!”

Gabriella wondered how she could be chatting about trivialities after what had happened last night, but she found some solace in such light conversation. It seemed to return her, however fleetingly, to the pleasant world she had known until a few hours ago.

“Robert...”

“Yes, Gabby.” His long face was attentive as he leaned across the table towards her.

“What do you know about the resistance?” Robert glanced at her in surprise. Then he turned towards the window, facing out onto the drab commons of the school. “It’s against the law to have anything to do with the resistance, you know.”

“Oh, really?” Gabriella asked dryly. “I wonder why.”

“The government says it’s because of terrorist acts. I suppose that’s as good an explanation as any.”

“Come now, Robert, surely you don’t believe that nonsense.”

He shrugged. “Perhaps not . . . though there is some evidence to support such a position.” “People are fighting for their lives, their freedom, the future of their country and the world,” Gabriella shouted, her voice rising in passion. “Surely you can see that.”

Robert turned and stared at her with his piercing green eyes. “I daresay you didn’t see it until last night, Gabby. After the awful thing that’s happened to Nigel, you’ve suddenly become a

full-blooded revolutionary.”

“Well, you know how Americans are, rabble-rousers one and all.”

“Gabby,” Robert said earnestly, “let’s not discuss politics just now. You’re terribly distraught, and I’m having some difficulty accepting what’s happened. Why don’t you rest here on the sofa, and I’ll be back in a little bit, after I’ve seen to my students. Does that suit you?”

“I really haven’t got anyplace else to go, have I?”

Robert smiled at her. “You know you’re always welcome here, Gabby, even if you do mouth radical slogans.”

Gabriella set her half-full cup and saucer down on the table and retired to the sofa in a corner of the room.

“I’ll get you a blanket,” Robert said.

“Thank you.”

Gabriella sat on the sofa as he left the room. She considered lying down and then thought better of it. She wanted to trust Robert, but something in the way he spoke of revolutionaries and radicals disturbed her. He didn’t seem entirely serious, and yet. . .

No, she was being silly. What she had witnessed last night had unnerved her, and she had hardly slept at all in the tube, what with the rattling of the train and her fear of being spotted by the Visitors. She had little money in her purse, so she couldn’t very well go wandering about London indefinitely; there was that to consider, too. Still, she really didn’t know Robert that well. He had been Nigel’s housemate, and was consequently one of the few people Gabriella could turn to in London. She had heard stories about “conversion,” a method of brainwashing that the Visitors used on their prisoners. Officially, there was no such process at all, of course, but the rumors were persistent.

She remembered that Robert had gone on holiday a few weeks ago—to France, he had said. He had tried to persuade Nigel and her to go with him but they were too busy. Nigel had remarked later that Robert had been very odd since his return. France often had that effect on people, she had told him, thinking that it was his imagination.

Now she wasn't so sure.

Gabriella rose and went to the door. She quietly opened it and looked out into the empty corridor. Satisfied that she would not be seen, she tiptoed out of Robert's office and made her way towards the building's entrance. She hadn't reached the end of the corridor before she heard Robert's echoing voice coming from round the corner.

"She's in my office," he was saying. "Just down here a few doors."

Gabriella shrank into an alcove. There was a door behind her and she slipped into a tiny broom closet an instant before Robert passed with four Visitors in red uniforms, their laser pistols drawn and at the ready.

Chapter 3

Along Shaftesbury Avenue, in London's West End, there are many theaters, and Shree Subhash made a habit of attending a play at one of them every Wednesday. Today, he was to see a farce by a noted British playwright. It was a very popular play, and he had waited quite some time for Ms tickets. Nevertheless, he had his reservations about seeing this particular play, since he was serious by nature. It was precisely this that made his Mends believe a bit of levity might do him good on occasion.

He had an extra ticket because he had planned to take his friend Jamella with him. At the last minute, she had phoned to say she wouldn't be able to go. He had been disappointed, and his efforts to find someone else to go with him had come to naught. Perhaps the theater management would give him his

money back if he explained what had happened. If not, he would give the ticket away before going in to see the play.

While queuing up, he noticed a young, blonde woman, looking terribly furtive and alone. That was understandable, what with these reptilian invaders occupying the city. Even now he could see the curve of the alien Mother Ship over the chimney of a permanent assurance building. Such a sight was difficult to avoid in London these days. The woman looked down at the pavement, away from the enormous spacecraft. She was walking along Shaftesbury Avenue towards him. Subhash found her very attractive, and something in her manner moved him. When she was near enough to hear him, he spoke softly to her.

"Miss, I do not mean to be forward," he said, "but I have an extra ticket to this performance. I would hate for it to go to waste. Would you accept it, please?"

For a moment, she didn't seem to realize he was speaking to her. She glanced over her shoulder, as if to see if anyone else might be the addressee. Seeing no one, she looked into Shree Subhash's face and smiled.

"Why, that's very kind of you," she said in a distinctly American accent. "I

haven't been to the theater in a long time."

Charmed by the way she spoke, he gestured for her to join him in the queue. "I am honored," he said, "to accompany such a lovely young lady. My name is Shree Subhash."

Again, she smiled. "You're really very kind. My name is Gabriella Nicks." She grasped his hand and shook it. "Are you from London?" "Oh, yes—bom and raised in this great city. My parents were from India, however. Bhaktipore. You, I believe, are from America?" "Yes, Philadelphia. Have you ever been there?"

"No, but I hope to . .

Something in the young woman's face changed. She seemed to look right through him at something behind his back. He glanced over his shoulder to see what it was.

A skyfighter, its bird-of-prey prow pointed in their direction, was floating over Shaftesbury Avenue. It moved slowly, as if looking for someone. Perhaps, thought Subhash, it was this very girl for whom they searched.

"It's very frightening," he said.

She shrank against him, and he put his arm around her protectively. He noted the nervous reactions of other people in the queue and on the sidewalk.

"You are not the only one who fears them," he said.

"You don't understand . . . the Visitors killed my fianc6. It was monstrous. They murdered him right in front of my flat." She looked up into his eyes, perhaps fearing that she had made a mistake in telling so much to a stranger. He must try to reassure her.

"My dear girl, how terrible for you," said Subhash. He squeezed her shoulder. "You have been fleeing from them ever since?"

"Yes."

Their conversation was interrupted as the queue began to move. In a few moments they were inside the theater. Subhash purchased a glass of wine for her

in the lobby, and she gratefully accepted.

“Shall we go in?” he suggested.

“Of course.” She downed the wine and went with him into the theater auditorium. “For the past sixteen hours, I’ve gone from one end of London to another and back again. A man I thought I could trust betrayed me. Come to think of it, he may have betrayed Nigel, too.” “They have their ways, these Visitors. Perhaps he could not help himself.”

Gabriella sat down in the fourteenth row, Subhash taking his seat next to her. Looking around, he satisfied himself that nobody was listening to them.

“There are, however,” he said, “those who are working to restore autonomy to humankind.” “But there are so many who believe the propaganda,” Gabriella said. “I was one of them myself until last night.”

“It is often true that people do not understand the suffering of others until they have suffered themselves.”

At that moment the lights went down and the curtain rose. A few minutes into the first act, Subhash began to think of the play as little more than an American television situation comedy done up for the stage. He wondered if Miss Nicks would take it amiss if he said as much. He had never cared much for such silly entertainments, and he wondered why he had bothered to buy tickets for this one. Oh, yes, to please his friends who thought he was too somber . . .

Suddenly the house lights came up, the actors looking as puzzled as the audience by the unexpected brightness. Responding to offstage instructions, apparently, they left the stage. An announcer emerged from the wings and urged everyone to remain in their seats.

The doors to the lobby flew open a few seconds after the announcer finished speaking. A complement of fully armed Visitors marched down the aisles, flashing a strange orange light at the frightened spectators.

“Oh, God, they’re looking for me!” Gabriella said.

“Calm yourself,” Subhash told her. “There are many who flee the Visitors. You are not the only one.”

The orange light flickered in the row just behind them. Subhash sensed that Gabriella wanted to jump out of her seat and run, but it would do her no good. There were dozens of Visitors, all with laser pistols. Nobody would get past them unless they permitted it.

The orange Sight crept down the row of seats towards them. It touched Subhash's hand and crept up Ms arm towards Ms face. It provoked a numbing sensation as it washed over him, but then it passed, leaving him a bit lethargic but none the worse for the experience.

As the light stole over Gabriella, it changed its tint, subtly drained of yellow until it was a crimson glow to match the Visitors' uniforms. The Visitor holding the pencil-sized device rasped smugly.

"Seize that woman!" the alien shouted.

Chapter 4

Gabriella was taken into custody and dragged out of the theater, despite Subhash's protests. A crowd quickly gathered on the pavement, gawking at the Visitors and their frightened, yet angry, captive.

"Take your filthy claws off me, your miserable snakes!" Gabriella spat.

The Visitor captain took note of the surrounding throngs—growing all the time as the theatergoers emerged from the lobby—and announced in a stentorian voice that Gabriella was under arrest.

"This woman has given aid and comfort to a terrorist," he shouted. "She is an enemy of the state."

"That is for a court of law to decide," Shree Subhash cried. "Where are you taking her?" He

stepped forward, only to be shouldered aside by a huge Visitor.

"We are taking her to justice," the Visitor captain said. "If you attempt to stand in our way, you too will be arrested."

"See here, now," said a man in the crowd. "No one is trying to stand in your way. There's no need to threaten anybody, now, is there?" "This woman has given aid and comfort to the enemy," the captain said coolly. "If any one of you stands with her, you will be adjudged as guilty as her . . . and you too will be arrested. Do I make myself clear?"

The crowd drew back, their fear almost tangible in the crisp afternoon air. It was one thing to discuss one's rights in private, or even in public . . . but when threatened with conversion or worse, few would stand behind what they had considered their convictions only an hour ago.

"Are you all cowards?" Shree Subhash shouted. "To watch an innocent woman

taken away by force without any explanation like this is quite beyond the pale. You are Englishmen and Englishwomen, people with a great tradition of freedom and justice. Can you not find it in your hearts to help this poor woman?" Subhash looked around him in vain for someone who would come to Gabriella's aid. He could see that several people wanted to help, but all were simply too intimidated by the threatening posture of the Visitors, with their drawn lasers and scowling human masks, to raise a hand in Gabriella's defense.

"Please," Subhash implored, "don't let them take her with them. It will be the end of her life . . . one way or another."

The Visitor captain turned to Subhash and snarled, "Perhaps you would like to accompany us too, sir?"

Subhash blanched, but he stood his ground. "If you take her, you must take me as well." The crowd gasped.

"That can be arranged," the Visitor captain said smugly.

Two soldiers grasped Subhash by his elbows and pushed him roughly forward. Gabriella was shoved after him as the crowd parted and dispersed.

"No," she cried. "This man hasn't done anything. Let him go, I beg of you."

"Silence," the Visitor captain hissed. "Another word out of you and we'll kill you and eat you right here on the street."

Something in his tone made Gabby realize he meant it. This captain was nasty even by Visitor terms. They would be martyrs to the cause of freedom if the captain carried out his threat, but few would ever know about it, what with the censorship the Visitors had imposed on newspapers, television, magazines, and even books.

Nothing bad was ever said about them in a public forum. On those few occasions when someone had spoken out against them, he or she invariably had been arrested as an enemy of the state. Like most people, she had ignored the truth until the man she loved had fallen dead at her feet.

They marched solemnly along Shaftesbury Avenue, towards the skyfighter hovering like some terrible, white insect over the street. The skyfighter began to

descend, slowly settling down just a few meters in front of them. A ramp descended from the side of the alien craft.

Just as they were about to board the skyfighter, Gabriella heard shouting coming from an alleyway. She paid it scant attention, going to her doom, and yet something in Subhash's manner made her wonder what it was all about.

The captain barked an order in the alien tongue, and three Visitors lumbered off in search of the man who had caused the disturbance. The others watched as they ran down the alley.

Their backs were turned to Subhash. Suddenly he reached under his coat and produced a laser pistol.

Before they could move, Subhash had dispatched two of the Visitors in a double blaze of smoking blue light. The dead aliens toppled from the ramp as the rest of Gabriella's escort looked about them to see where their enemy lay, confused and frightened.

At that moment, the apparently dispirited crowd began to shout, and a man—the very one who had argued with the Visitor captain —pulled a pistol from his pocket and began to shoot at the aliens. He hit one in the head, killing the creature instantly.

A general uproar ensued, with gunfire and laser beams exploding in the busy street. The remaining aliens ran up the ramp as fast as they could, leaving the captain to stand alone and firing indiscriminately into the crowd.

“Captain,” said Shree Subhash, placing the muzzle of his laser behind the alien's ear, “you will stop firing now.”

The captain froze. He did as he was told, pointing the laser down and taking his finger off the firing mechanism.

“Gabriella,” Subhash said, “please take the captain's weapon.”

She did as he asked, amazed at the lightness of the laser. So much power to come out of this toylike device . . .

“Now you will come with us, Captain.”

The captain said nothing for a moment. Then he turned and faced Subhash.

“I’d rather die,” he said at last.

“That,” Subhash replied dryly, “can be arranged.”

The captain’s face was inscrutable behind his human mask, but at last he nodded.

“Very well,” he said, “I am your prisoner.”

Chapter 5

The man who had fired the first shot after the distraction in the alley tossed off his cap, revealing a shock of blond hair and a wicked smile.

“Well done, lads,” he shouted as the bodies of the two aliens who had gone after the mysterious noisemaker in the alley were dragged onto the pavement.

“Not bad, Subhash,” he said, loping up the ramp.

“Miss Nicks had very much to do with it, Ian,” Subhash replied. “But now there is a danger that we will be fired upon by those inside the skyfighter. We must get away from here quickly.”

“I think not.” Ian caressed the captain’s cheek with his pistol. “Not with our friend here in our custody.”

“They may very well consider him expendable,” Subhash said, “if they can destroy the London resistance in one fell swoop.”

“I see your point.” Ian turned to the captain. “Shall we be shoving off’ then, old thing?”

The captain glared at him, but there was little he could do but obey. He started down the ramp with the three humans.

“You will all die horribly for this,” said the captain.

“Will we, now?” Ian chuckled.

As they took the alien into custody, people began to cheer. Windows opened on the second and third storeys of nearby buildings, as the curious began to pop their heads out to get a look at the resistance leaders who had made fools of the Visitors.

“My Mends,” Ian shouted to them, “this is only the beginning. For every atrocity

the lizards have committed, we'll kill half a dozen of them. How does that strike your fancy?"

An approving cheer rose from the people leaning out their windows and those gathered on the pavement. Ian basked in their adulation for a few moments. As soon as he tired of it, he jerked the captain's elbow and pushed the alien roughly through the crowd.

Gabriella turned to Subhash. "Where is he taking him?" she asked.

"The same place that we are going to," he replied.

She hesitated for a moment, but Subhash looked so earnestly into her eyes that she decided it would be for the best for her to go along. There was nowhere in London where she could be safe now . . . except, perhaps, if she was with the resistance. And, if she was to avenge Nigel, it seemed logical that these were the people most likely to help her. Besides, she liked Subhash; he had been kind to her.

"I guess I don't really have much choice," she said.

"I wish that it were not so," Subhash said sadly, "but I am afraid that it is."

Gabriella and Subhash followed the prisoner, Ian and his men. Ian turned to them as they walked into an alley.

"Here now," he said. "She can't come with us. This is a man's business we're about. There's no room for a woman where we're going, and even if there were, we don't know if we can trust her." "I am certain that we can," Subhash said coolly. "She has shown herself to be a brave woman."

"That's not the point, is it?" Ian persisted. "This isn't something we can just let anyone in on, like queuing up for the cinema."

Angered, Gabriella clutched Ian's wrist. "You might think of me as just another silly American girl, but the man I love died in my arms last night, killed by those bloody lizards. I don't intend to let them get away with it."

Something in her tone, or perhaps the look in her eyes, gave Ian pause. He relented.

“All right,” he said, still speaking to Subhash, “she can come along . . . but she’s your responsibility. If anything—anything at all—goes wrong because of her, Subhash, it’ll go badly for the both of you. Do I make myself clear?”

“Eminently, my dear Ian.”

Gabriella sensed that the more polite Subhash became, the more enraged he was on the inside. She felt grateful to him for sticking up for her, but it seemed to have been her own words that changed Ian’s mind. Now she had to win his trust... if that were possible. Well, there was really nothing for it but to wait and see.

“This way,” Ian commanded.

A van backed into the alley and two men leaped out to open its doors. Gabriella and the others got inside and slammed the doors. A moment later they roared off into traffic. The driver, a thick-necked man of about thirty, turned left and then right as Gabriella watched through the windshield. There were no windows on the van’s rear doors, so if she wanted to know where they were going—and she certainly *did* want to know—this was the only way to find out.

“You’ll have to put this on, miss,” one of Ian’s men said. He proffered a length of linen.

“What do you mean?” But Gabby was quite certain she knew what he had in mind.

“It’s a blindfold,” the man said, his pink face

apologetic and insistent at the same time.

“I hardly think that’s necessary,” Gabriella protested.

“I’m afraid it is, miss,” Ian said with great annoyance. “If you want to go with us, it’s quite necessary.”

Gabriella looked around her. All the men were staring at her expectantly. She turned to Subhash, and he returned her gaze with a regretful expression.

“I am afraid you must, Gabriella,” he said. “When—and if—we know that we can trust you,” Ian said, “then we won’t worry about such niceties. In the

meantime, do as we say or we'll leave you at the next comer."

"Very well." Gabriella sighed. She supposed it was worth it, if only to keep out of harm's way, let alone find a way to pay the Visitors back for what they had done to Nigel. "I'll do as you say." "Good girl," Ian said. "I'm glad you intend to be reasonable."

Ian's less than charming smile made her wish she were in the hands of someone else, but at least she had one Mend among this rowdy lot. She glanced at Subhash's sympathetic face one last time before the blindfold was placed over her eyes.

Chapter 6

The van slowed to a stop much sooner than Gabriella expected. She heard a grating sound, which might have been a gate opening to admit them. The van moved on slowly and then bumped up onto a hard surface, and the motor was turned off. Gabriella heard Ian barking a command, and then the sound of wooden doors being shut. Apparently they had entered some sort of garage.

The van's back doors were flung open, and the pungent odor of rotting wood and musk assailed Gabriella's nostrils.

"Step down, miss," the man who had given her the blindfold said. His rough hand took her elbow and assisted her. She almost fell, but the steady hand held her up as they entered a building whose walls were made of rough stone, which she rubbed against painfully once or

twice. A dampness pervaded the passageways as she was led along blindly, and she thought she heard the echo of squealing rats. The corridors twisted and turned, and Gabriella was certain they were going underground. At last they came to a halt and someone fumbled noisily with a key.

A moment later, a door swung inward on rusty hinges. Gabriella was led forward and seated in a chair, and her blindfold removed. The light blinded her for a few moments, but gradually she was able to focus on the men standing above her, staring down grimly at their unwelcome new member.

Her new surroundings looked like a dungeon: water seeping from between stones; arched doorways; pikes and battle-axes decorating the walls. She guessed that this building was at least five hundred years old.

There were more pressing matters to attend to at the moment, however. Ian, Subhash, and the others were staring down at her as if they expected her to say something. She decided not to disappoint them.

"Nice decor," she said, "though the place could use a plumber."

Subhash and the man who had tied the blindfold smiled, but the other faces remained blank.

“You might find that a more sober attitude will help you here, miss,” Ian said. “This is serious business we’re about.”

Gabriella fell silent. She had the impression that she and Ian were never going to get along very well, unless she became such a fierce and dedicated resistance fighter that even he would be impressed. She sized Mm up as a woman hater, and was quite sure his animosity towards her was more complex than mere concern that a woman was not up to being a resistance fighter—which was poppycock in itself, of course. There were women in the resistance all over the world. Dr. Juliet Parrish was one of the leaders of the American resistance. No, Ian’s animosity went much deeper than old-fashioned British chauvinism.

“You’ll have to live like a man here, miss,” Ian said.

“I’m ready for any hardship.” Gabriella smiled at Mm ruefully.

“We shall see about that.” Ian turned and walked under an arch, leaving the room.

Gently taking her by the hand, Subhash helped Gabriella out of the chair. “You will find that Ian is a strong willed man.”

“Ian will find that I am a strong willed woman,” she said.

All the others had dispersed, leaving them alone. “I have no doubt of your strength, Gabriella,” Subhash said. “But you must cooperate with Ian, at least for a little while. This is very dangerous, and the lizards will kill us if they ever catch up with us.”

Suddenly a terrible sound issued from some unknown part of the dungeon. It was a rasping, inhuman scream, a cry that could only come from a Visitor.

“They are wasting no time today,” said Subhash. “They will extract what information they can from the Visitor captain . . . and they will do it most efficiently.”

In spite of the alienness of the scream, Gabriella was horrified. No doubt such

treatment was necessary at times, but they must not have even tried to question the captain before inflicting torture.

“It is Ian’s way,” Subhash said. “Come, let us go to another part of the house, where we will not have to listen to this.”

Gabriella was quick to agree with him, and he led her through a door to another room and then up a dark stairway. They emerged into a lighted room with no decorations on the wall, a small table with writing implements on it, and three stiff-backed chairs.

Pulling one of the chairs out from the table, Subhash indicated that Gabriella should sit down. He sat down next to her, folding his hands as he looked earnestly at her.

“I am very sorry that you have been drawn into this,” he said. “You see, Nigel Smythe-Walmsley was one of our key agents. His death has been a blow to the resistance that will take some time to recover from. We arrived at your apartments just moments after you left, and we followed you. It was no coincidence that I spoke to you at the theater.”

“I never noticed I was being followed,” Gabriella said. “But then, I don’t suppose I was looking for humans, was I?”

“Of course not. Not with the Visitors chasing after you, Gabriella ... You don’t mind if I call you Gabriella, do you?”

She laughed. “It’s a little late for you to ask me that, don’t you think? After all we’ve been through together in the past few hours, you may call me anything you like, Mr. Subhash.”

“Just call me Subhash.” He smiled at her, showing two rows of fine white teeth.

“Okay, you’ve got a deal.” She reached out and shook his hand. “There’s one thing I’ve been wondering about, though, Subhash.”

“And what is that?”

“How you’ve come to be a resistance leader.” “It is simple. I am English, and my country has been invaded.”

Before Gabriella could say another word, a man entered the room. He wore a ski mask, and in his hand was a pistol which he pointed directly at Subhash.

Chapter 7

“Jimmy McHugh,” the gunman said, twirling his pistol like a cowboy, “at your service, mum.”

“How did you find your way in here?” Subhash asked.

McHugh laughed, his freckled face flushed beneath his ski mask. “I’ve come to talk a little business with Ian ... or you, Subhash. Whichever of you is more reasonable.”

“Divide and conquer, is that it?” Subhash looked amused.

“Aye, that it is.” McHugh slipped his pistol into a holster concealed underneath his jacket. “And from what I hear, lad, it won’t take much effort to do just that.”

Subhash sighed. “We all have a common enemy, and we must work together.”

“Tell that to himself downstairs, taking his pleasure at this very moment by torturing a lizard to death.”

“Sometimes such harsh measures can’t be avoided,” Subhash said. “As an old IRA man, you should know that.”

“As an old IRA man, I recognize them that enjoys inflicting pain, too, me boyo.”

“Are you saying that Ian takes pleasure in this?” Subhash asked. But the indignation in his voice rang false.

“Well, let’s just say that you know that fine English lad downstairs at least as well as I do, Subhash. Whatever you think about him is good enough for me.”

Subhash remained silent, which made Gabriella wonder if he secretly agreed with the Irishman.

“I notice there’s a third chair at table here, Subhash,” McHugh said. “Do you mind if I join you?”

“Please do.”

McHugh patted the breast of Ms jacket once for good measure and pulled out a chair. He turned it around and sat down with his forearms resting on the top of the chair’s back.

“I’m going to make the same offer today that I’ve made so many times before,” the IRA man said. “I don’t know how many more times the big man will send me over here to reason with the lot of you. I think he’s growing a mite tired of your foolishness already.”

“Then why don’t you leave us alone?” Subhash asked. “We do not plead with you to come here. Quite the contrary, we ask you not to come.”

“And yet you never turn me away,” McHugh said.

“That,” Subhash dryly replied, “would be a breach of courtesy.”

“I thought you’d see it that way,” McHugh chuckled, “especially since you’ll be needing our services.”

“Come now, Jimmy,” Subhash said. “Did we need your services this afternoon when we captured this Visitor captain?”

“Capturing the Visitor captain, is it? And who was it who tipped your lads off this evening past that Smythe-Walmsley wasn’t long for this world?”

Subhash leaned forward, his chair creaking. “Last evening? I was given to believe that it was late last night. That was why our men couldn’t get to Nigel in time.”

Gabriella clutched Subhash’s arm. “Are you saying that Nigel’s life could have been saved?”

“I... I don’t know,” Subhash stammered, clearly shaken by what he had just learned. He turned to McHugh. “Is what you say true, Jimmy?”

“As God is my witness, Subhash, it was no later than half past six when we sent a man to

tell your people what we knew.”

“But I heard nothing about it,” Subhash protested. “You must believe me, Gabriella, I did not know.”

“Someone did,” Gabriella said.

“Now, who do you suppose that someone might be?” McHugh asked in a mock-innocent tone.

They all knew whom he was talking about. “But why would he do such a thing?” Subhash cried in anguish.

“You wouldn’t understand,” McHugh said, a note of sympathy in Ms voice. “You’re not the sort who could bump off Ms mates so that you could ascend to the top of the heap.”

“Do you mean to tell me that you believe Ian purposely allowed Nigel to die so that he could gain power in the resistance?”

“Think what you will, my friend,” McHugh said, “but don’t think too long. I’ve a feeling that you command as much respect as Ian—perhaps more. You could easily fail into enemy hands, or have an accident, too.”

Subhash sank back into his chair, deep in thought.

“He’s going to pay for tMs,” Gabriella promised. Tears squeezed out of her eyes and traced their way down her cheeks. “I’m not going to let him get away with it.”

“Please, Gabriella,” Subhash said. “We cannot be certain that this is the case. Perhaps Ian can explain. We must not jump to conclusions, in any case.”

Gabriella sighed. “Maybe you’re right.” She didn’t really believe it, after her brief exposure to Ian, but she had to give him the benefit of the doubt. Her sense of justice was too strong to permit her to do otherwise.

“Believe what you will,” said McHugh, rising. “I think I’d best be running along now.”

As the Irishman stood, Subhash smiled wryly. “Perhaps you’ve only done what I suspected you were up to when you first entered this room with your gun drawn, McHugh . . . divide and conquer.”

“Perhaps, but if that’s the case, I did it quite by chance,” McHugh said, looking straight at first Subhash and then Gabriella. “What I’ve told you is the truth.”

The sincere look in his eye convinced Gabriella that it was indeed the truth. How the message had been held up so long that Nigel had been trapped was still not known. Even if Ian had a good story, they couldn’t be sure he was telling the truth. He must have known they would find out about the IRA’s message; no doubt he had a foolproof excuse.

“Good day to you,” McHugh said.

“Just a minute.” Gabriella stood and faced him. “Are you willing to say what you’ve said to Ian?”

Chapter 8

“Not here,” McHugh said at length.

There it was, then, thought Gabriella; if he wouldn't stand and accuse Ian, they couldn't take his remarks seriously . . . Perhaps McHugh had only meant to stir things up, as Subhash suggested. If so, that meant he couldn't be trusted. But if it were true . . .

“Why won't you talk to Ian?” she asked suspiciously.

“Perhaps in a more neutral setting, I would feel more inclined towards such a confrontation. But not here, where he commands all these men.”

Subhash thought that over. Doubtless McHugh's hesitation seemed sensible to him under the circumstances. After all, the place was crawling with British resistance fighters, and there was still no love lost between them

and the IRA., even though there had been an undeclared truce since the Visitors' invasion. Gabriella hadn't been particularly interested in all this when Nigel had discussed it over kippers with her, believing that it didn't really concern her. It did strike her now, however, that the two factions did not trust one another enough to successfully fend off the alien attack together . . . and if her suspicions about Ian were correct, things weren't likely to improve.

“Good day to you, then,” McHugh said, rising and backing towards the door.

Before he could reach it, the door flew open and three men rushed inside. McHugh tried to pull Ms revolver, but they were on Mm too quickly. He struggled to no avail, overpowered and disarmed in an instant.

Ian entered the room, a disdainful look on his face.

“I had thought better of you, Subhash,” he said, without looking at Subhash.

“What are you talking about?” Subhash demanded.

“You know perfectly well.” Ian turned and looked straight at him, the glint of victory in his eye. “You have been conspiring with our enemy.”

“Enemy? . . . Since when axe the IRA our enemy?”

“Since they permitted the Visitors to kill Nigel.”

“What the devil are you saying, you filthy liar?” shouted McHugh.

With one quick motion, Ian turned and struck the Irishman across the mouth with the back of his hand. McHugh lurched, writhing in frustration as he attempted to break loose and strike back. But the three resistance fighters held him fast.

“Take him away,” Ian commanded.

They dragged the bellowing, red-faced McHugh out of the room. Subhash stood as if to help him, and then saw several shadowy figures just across the threshold.

“Ah, Subhash,” Ian cooed, “showing your true colors now, are you?”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Gabriella demanded.

“Young woman, if I were you I’d hold my tongue,” Ian said. “You may very well be implicated in this scheme yourself.”

Gabriella felt her cheeks flush hot in anger. “How dare you imply such a thing, you . . . you ***martinet!***”

“You won’t get away with it,” Subhash promised, “if you try to harm this woman.”

“Harm her,” Ian said with apparent sincerity. “I’m trying to keep her from betraying us all, Subhash . . . and you know it.”

“No, Ian,” Gabriella said with contempt. “You’re trying to grab all the power in the resistance for yourself. You don’t care what it means to the future of England or even to the entire human race. In your lust for power, you’ll destroy anyone who stands in your way.”

Ian smirked. “Not very convincing talk, coming from a vixen who may very well have engineered the death of one of our best men.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about *Nigel*, girl—what did you think I was talking about?”

“You vile thing!” Gabriella leaped at him, nails digging at his face. She was prevented from inflicting any real damage by two of Ian’s men. She struggled to get free, but couldn’t quite manage it. “Let me go!”

Ian sneered at her from only inches away, as his henchmen’s strong arms restrained her. “So you’d attack the leader of the resistance, would you?”

Gabriella spat in his face.

Glaring, Ian wiped away the spittle. “Take her away,” he said coldly.

“You cannot do this,” Subhash said.

“I warn you, Subhash ...”

“Ian, I implore you.”

“Take him, too,” Ian said, turning away from Subhash.

Several more men entered the room and forcibly restrained Subhash. He did not attempt to resist, allowing them to lead him out into the corridor without a word of protest.

Gabriella was silent now, too. She cursed her luck, falling out of the frying pan into the fire; first in the clutches of the Visitors, and now under the power of this megalomaniac.

Suddenly the corridor shook, as if the ground below were in the throes of an earthquake. Plaster dust spurted from the cracking ceiling, and everyone was tossed helplessly against the walls. The roar of explosions came from outside as the men shouted excitedly.

“Hold on to those prisoners!” Ian commanded. But as he turned to face his men,

another shock wave coursed through the corridor and an ancient beam fell to the floor with a crash. Two men were caught underneath it, their cries rising out of the miasma of plaster dust as pikes and halberds fell to the floor with a clatter.

Subhash jabbed his elbow into the guts of the disoriented fellow to his right, and punched the one to his left in the nose. One of Gabriella's captors was on the floor, and the other fell as Subhash struck him on the back of the head.

Taking Gabriella by the hand, he ran back past the room where McHugh had found them. They came to a winding stairway, and were on the level below in seconds. A painting of a seventeenth-century nobleman thudded to the floor, and flames licked around a window casement.

Subhash took Gabriella to a huge drawing room. Approaching the fireplace, he ran his

fingers over the bricks.

"What are you . . . ?" Before she could finish her question, the back of the fireplace swung open, and they bent to crawl into a stone passageway. It was pitch dark inside, but Subhash knew the way. A few moments later they saw light, and then came to an iron grating festooned with weeds. Putting his shoulder against the grating, Subhash pushed it up and over, and they crawled into an overgrown garden.

Gabriella stood, seeing a skyfighter raining blue fire down on an ancient mansion on the other side of a cracked stone wall. The screams of dying men could be heard over the *whoosh* of laser fire and the crackling of flames.

"Can't we do something?" she cried.

"Not now," Subhash said, taking her hand again. "Now all we can do is run."

And they ran, out of the garden in the shelter of the wall, as the headquarters of British Resistance was destroyed behind them.

Chapter 9

Medea, her stomach grumbling with hunger, shouted at her underlings: “Bring the prisoner to me!”

Half a dozen red-clad Visitors scurried out of the command center of the Mother Ship to do her bidding. She turned to the female figure, who wore her dermoplast human pseudoskin even here in space.

“Beverly, we have crushed the British Resistance, and yet their leaders have all escaped . . . all but this one.”

Beverly, second-in-command, said dryly, “Yes, it was a rather good plan, wasn’t it?”

The fact that her second-in-command had thought of the successful plan seemed to mean nothing to Medea, and Beverly knew that Medea would have no compunctions about claiming to

have thought of everything herself. That was the nature of things in the Sirian Army. Nevertheless, the bony sfae-reptile had slipped up twice before. She was so nervous about losing the battle of Britain that she had become an anorexic, eating virtually nothing. She had gone from portliness to little more than a skeleton in only a few months.

Beverly opened a small, plastic canister and removed a mouse by the tail. Unhinging her jaw, she took the squealing rodent in one bite and swallowed it without chewing.

Staring at her resentfully, Medea doubtless remembered when she had been able to eat anything she wanted. She had no appetite anymore, and would never have one again unless she subdued the British Resistance. Well, after today, it seemed as if she were well on her way to victory . . . unless those escaped rebel leaders managed to get the resistance started up again. After failing at two missions since she had come to Earth, she was not about to allow the Terrans to get the

better of her a third time.

The door slid open and the guards reappeared, dragging a human with them. They pushed the man forward until he faced Medea and forced Mm to his knees in front of her.

“So,” Medea said, “perhaps you feel a little more like talking now?”

The man, much weakened by torture and
privation, said nothing.

“Answer her when she speaks to you,” said the captain of the guards. He clutched the man’s face in Ms talons, squeezing as if to break Ms jaw.

The human groaned. “I won’t talk,” he murmured, barely able to speak.

“So you haven’t had enough yet, have you?” Medea taunted. “We’ll soon see about that.” “You won’t make me talk,” the prisoner said, “no matter what you do to me.”

“I’m afraid you’re mistaken,” Medea told Mm. “You axe a leader of the resistance, and your father is a Member of the House of Lords, We will make you tell us everything you know . . . one way or another.”

The prisoner shuddered, knowing from firsthand experience just how sadistic Medea could be. Even Beverly seemed a bit taken aback by the threat.

“We haven’t put you in the conversion chamber yet, have we?” she asked. “What you’ve been through thus far is little more than loving attention in comparison with what’s to come if you don’t cooperate, do you understand?”

Staring her straight in the eye, the prisoner said nothing. He was one of the toughest they’d ever dealt with. It wasn’t going to be easy to break Mm. He might be one of those who would die first, in which case Medea would be in trouble. This fellow was too valuable to kill, and yet she was becoming angry enough to finish him off just for spite. Her only hope was that the conversion chamber would do the job that torture had so far failed to accomplish. She had her doubts that it would work; unfortunately, she had but little choice now. There were facts that had to be learned if the subjugation of Britain was to be wholly

successful, and in this human's brain was the key to learning them. Prying them out of the stubborn mammal's brain was not going to be easy, however. There was one other way to persuade him, but it might not work.

"That girl," Medea said, "the one you are engaged to marry ..."

The prisoner looked at her sharply. "What about her?"

"She is in our custody," Medea said, her der-moplast face smiling maliciously.

The prisoner's face, so courageous even in the face of more torture, fell. "You're lying!"

"Am I? Watch this." Medea pressed a button, and an overhead projector presented a hologram showing the aisles of a West End theater. Crimson-uniformed Visitors searched for someone, and the prisoner soon saw who it was. A young woman was apprehended and removed from the theater.

The hologram ended there, and Medea looked at the dejected prisoner with renewed hope. He hung his head in despair, weeping, "If you've harmed her ..." he managed to say.

"No harm has come to her," Medea said, "and none will, so long as you do as I ask."

"You ask that I betray my father and my country for the sake of the woman I love. How can I make such a choice?"

"Look at it this way," Medea said. "Your country will submit to us in the end, no matter if you cooperate or not, and your father will be forced to recognize us, as will all of Parliament. You cannot stop that. Indeed, you are only prolonging the inevitable agony. On the other hand, you can save the woman you love from pain and probable death, while helping events along in their ineluctable course. Now what do you say." "Good God, what can I say? I cannot allow the woman I love to be killed, but I cannot commit treason, either."

"You must make a decision within the next few hours, or her death will be on your conscience."

The prisoner shook his head in dismay.

“Take him back to his cell, where he can think things over,” Medea said.

The guards took him by the arms, but he shook them off for a moment and said through gritted teeth to Medea: “You’ve given me a hard choice, one I’ll have to live with for the rest of my life, but I have no choice but to do as you ask.”

“On your word.” Such things were important to the British.

“I, Nigel Smythe-Walmsley, swear as a gentleman that I will help you.”

Chapter 10

Subhash and Gabriella stole through the alleyways of Soho, an unsavory part of the city at best. With the Visitors about, however, the seaminess of this part of London seemed positively charming by comparison.

Occasionally, they were forced to come out into the open. Otherwise, they would circle endlessly through Soho until they were spotted by one of the alien patrols.

Now they emerged onto Wardour Street, slowly working their way north as they attempted to join the milling pedestrians unobtrusively.

“How long can we afford to walk out in the open?” Gabriella asked.

“Not long. But we cannot simply cross Wardour Street from one alley to another. It will look too suspicious.”

They walked a few blocks, stopping briefly to

pretend they were looking in shop windows. A skyfighter passed overhead once, but they were hidden by an awning. When Subhash was quite certain they were unobserved, he pulled Gabriella by the hand into an alley.

“This way,” he said.

Walking briskly, just short of running, they hurried down the alleyway. It was as dark as a moonlit night between the two buildings, but Subhash didn’t slow his pace at all, until a voice called out to them.

“Not so fast now, the two of you.”

They looked back, terrified that it would be the Visitors. A lone figure stood silhouetted in the alleyway.

“What do you want?” Gabriella demanded.

“Just a wee chat, miss.”

“And just who is it who wants to chat?”

“A friend, I suspect.”

“I have no friends whose names I don’t know,” Gabriella said, prepared to turn and go on walking.

“The name is Kelly,” the man said. “Seamus Patrick Kelly.”

Subhash squeezed Gabriella’s hand. The name meant something to him, obviously. But what?

“The legendary Seamus Patrick Kelly?” Subhash asked politely.

“Modesty forbids me.”

“Then you are the same, are you not?”

“There is only one, so far as I know.”

Kelly moved closer, a wiry man with sandy hair and spectacles. He looked like a schoolmaster, Gabriella thought.

“What is it that you want with us?” Subhash said.

“I want to know if my boy McHugh is still alive,” Kelly said.

Another IRA man, Gabriella thought. This one didn’t look half as forbidding as the late Mr. McHugh, and yet Subhash seemed quite wary. Subhash shook his head. “McHugh is dead.” “And who killed him?”

“I don’t know whose hand it was, or whether it was the Visitors themselves who finished him,” Subhash said. “I didn’t see.”

“But it was Ian, was it not, who gave the order to take him?”

Subhash nodded.

“I knew it wasn’t you, Subhash. Your ambition doesn’t run to madness, like

Ian's."

"I'm sorry about McHugh," said Subhash. "He came to warn us about Ian."

"Ian is the filthy scum who's not only killed my lad McHugh, but your own lad as well." "Smythe-Walmsley?"

"The very same." Kelly sized Gabriella up with a penetrating gaze. "And this is the lass who saw Smythe-Walmsley last?"

"Yes, I am," Gabriella said. "And I intend to make them pay."

"Who?" Kelly asked. "The Visitors? ... Or Ian?"

"All of them." The coldness of her tone surprised her. Was she so bitter already?

"You'll find no way to fight them in London," Kelly said. "Not today, at any rate. They've taken over the city, and the rest of England will follow. It's what I always believed I wanted to see, but now that I've seen it, I find myself sympathetic with the English for the first time."

"Perhaps it is time for the English and the Irish to forget about their differences."

"My old grandfather, killed by the Black and Tans when he was a young man, will turn over in his grave, but I think you're right, Subhash. These lizards will be the end of us all if we don't join forces."

"I'll fight on your side," Gabriella said. "I'm an exchange student, and I don't owe my allegiance to the British, and even if I did I'd want to join you."

"I'd heard you were a spirited lass," Kelly said. "And I believe you mean what you say." "Indeed I do, Mr. Kelly. Indeed I do." Gabriella set her jaw so hard that it hurt her teeth. "You have no idea what it would mean to me to be able to avenge Nigel's death."

"Even if it means working with those who might have killed him themselves before the Visitors came?"

"Even so."

Kelly mulled that over for a moment. “Come with me,” he said at length.

He turned and walked back the way he had come a few moments before. Gabriella glanced at Subhash, shrugged, and the two of them followed the Irishman.

Before he reached the street, Kelly stopped by a thick metal door painted jet black and set in the crumbling brick wall of the building on his left. He rapped sharply three times and waited.

A moment later, the iron door opened, and Kelly gestured for them to go inside.

Subhash and Gabriella exchanged one last glance before entering. A second later, the door clanged shut behind them.

Chapter 11

Nigel was alone. He sat on the edge of his bed, resentful and hurt. His father had been called off to some urgent meeting and was unable to spend the day with Nigel. Nigel was used to that. His father was often busy. One day he would be in the House of Lords, everyone said. But that didn't matter today.

Today was Nigel's birthday.

There had been a party, with Mother and Auntie and twenty-five children in attendance, the servants bustling about the manor with cake and party favors . . . but it just wasn't the same without Father.

He sulked, thinking that just this one time Father should have stayed home with him. He was seven today. All his other birthdays had been so happy. It was as if the world were only created to please him, but now he had to listen

to Mother and Auntie go on about duty and responsibility while Father looked after more important things . . . more important than Nigel, it seemed.

Well, he didn't care about it, any of it. He would go off by himself and be an adventurer. He didn't care about the world of politics, and he didn't care about the comforts of home and hearth. He would be a pirate. Of course, he would write to Mother regularly . . . and even Auntie on occasion . . . but never Father. Never. He would never, never forgive Father for not being with him on his seventh birthday.

Nigel heard a faint creaking sound, and he looked up to see a glimmer of green light shining through a crack in his wardrobe.

"How curious," he said, imitating the way his father talked. He rose and walked slowly towards the wardrobe as the light grew brighter. He hesitated for a moment, and then stepped forward, his hand reaching out for the wardrobe door.

Taking a deep breath, Nigel flung open the

door.

He screamed as a monstrous serpent's head slithered towards him. The green light seemed to emanate from its ghastly scales, and its flickering tongue shot out repeatedly in Nigel's direction.

Nigel tried to shut the door on the monster, but it was no good. The wardrobe's wood dissolved into a noxious vapor in his fingers and he was left to stand alone and unprotected against the advancing, giant reptile. He wanted to cry, but Father had taught him to be brave, and he must face this terror with courage now, or he was no Englishman.

The monster's hinged jaws opened, strings of venom connecting the enormous fangs. The forked tongue leaped from its hissing mouth as the immense head lunged.

Nigel sidestepped the beast's attack. Rather than trying to run away, he darted past it. The serpent was so huge, however, that he was unable to escape it. Its coils closed about him, the monster's scales rasping against the ground as it squeezed.

Nigel was unable to light his way free. He struggled valiantly, but the squamous flesh held him fast. It was impossible to catch his breath. Even so, he battered at it with his clenched fists, shouting, "You'll never defeat me, you filthy beast!"

The harder he fought, the more deadly the snake's grip became. Nigel could feel his life slipping away as he gasped for air.

Where is your father now that you need him? a voice in his head asked. ***Where is England now that you need her?***

Where indeed? Why was he left alone here to be destroyed by this giant snake while others stayed comfortably at home and his father went

off to do as he pleased?

The serpent's head loomed over him. Was it going to strike now and fill his veins with its venom?

The monster hissed, "Join me."

The death grip of its coils relaxed a bit, not enough for Nigel to free himself, but enough so that he could breathe again.

“Join me,” the monster repeated.

“I can’t,” Nigel said, amazed that it could speak. “I simply can’t.”

“And why not?” the serpent asked in the tones of a strict headmaster.

“You are the enemy of Britain,” Nigel said in his piping child’s voice. “I must resist you.” “But if you join forces with me, we two will be unbeatable. We will make a better Earth.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“But you must, for I can destroy you in an instant if I wish to.”

“Then do so,” Nigel said bravely. “I am prepared to die for my country.”

“But why?” the serpent asked. “There is really no need for you to die.”

“If I must die, then I must. I will not be a traitor.”

“Look, then, upon your own death.”

Still wrapped in the serpent’s coils, Nigel watched as he was chased down a dark alleyway by armed Visitors. As he came out into the open, the dome of St. Paul’s rose above the surrounding buildings. He was running towards Amen Court, to Gabby’s flat. If he could hide there, he might be able to elude his pursuers.

Just as he turned the corner, a bolt of fiery blue energy caught him on the right shoulder. He staggered, grasping the cauterized hole in his flesh, but he kept moving.

Crossing the courtyard, he was hit by laser fire a second time. Somehow he continued on, though his pace was considerably slackened.

He reached Gabby’s door and pounded fiercely. He heard voices shouting behind him, a woman screaming in the distance. Laser fire singed the air around him.

“For God’s sake, Gabby,” he whispered as his alter ego rapped on the door for all

he was worth, “open up.”

The sound of the door being unlocked came just before the laser blast burned through his back. Nigel’s body fell inside as Gabby cried out in horror.

Chapter 12

Disoriented, Nigel watched himself as an adult. He was no longer a boy battling a giant serpent. He was a man, dying in the arms of the woman he loved. It seemed so real . . .

But how could it be? He was here, alive, wasn't he? It was some sort of simulacrum that he had seen die. Now there was nothing but darkness . . . and pain.

His entire nervous system was on fire. The agony shot through him head to toe in increasingly devastating waves.

"No!" he screamed. But he couldn't stop it. He tried to ignore it, to think about what was happening to him. He was not a little boy, and he was not dead, and when he thought about these things, he suffered terrible pain. That could only mean one thing.

The Visitors.

He was being tortured. *Converted.*

But he barely had time to realize this when the pain raged through Mm again, driving everything out of Ms mind.

When the billion pieces of Ms shattered consciousness drifted back together, he picked up Ms train of thought again. It took a monumental effort, but he managed somehow.

Medea had promised that he would not be converted if he agreed to help them, but she was obviously taking no chances. They had Gabby in their clutches, tat that was not enough. They would brainwash Mm as well.

It wasn't going to work. He wouldn't permit it. He would die first. No, they would not destroy Ms mind. He would cooperate with them only insofar as it

would help Gabby, but they had already broken their agreement with him.

Another surge of pain shot through him.

“Steady, old thing,” he groaned. If he could just outlast the conversion tube, he could make it through tMs thing all right. It seemed that the Visitors had given up on psychological trickery and were using torture as a last-ditch effort. If he could convince himself of this, it might give him the strength to see it through.

It was so exquisitely painful now that it almost seemed as if he weren’t here. His mind seemed to transcend the agony for a moment, but then the pain returned more powerfully and horribly than ever.

They would stop at nothing to break him, but he mustn’t let it happen.

Join us.

“No!” Nigel cried. “Never!”

Your father has betrayed you. You owe him nothing.

A part of him still wanted to believe that, but Nigel knew that was the selfish, childish part of him. Father’s responsibilities had kept him away, not a lack of love. Now Nigel had responsibilities, too, not only to the woman he loved, but to his country. He would not let the Visitors win. Besides, he was not altogether certain that Gabby was their captive. He had asked to see her, but all they had shown Mm was a hologram. No, it would take more than this to make him betray Ms nation.

“You will never defeat Great Britain,” he said, even as a current of pain coursed through Ms body. “Do you hear me?”

join us.

“You will never succeed in subjugating the human spirit.”

Pain.

Join us.

Pain.

Join us.

It went on until Nigel's body could stand no more. And yet he had found Ms center. He had the will to resist torture, even the advanced techniques of the Visitors.

Even as his mind spiraled down into unconsciousness, he took satisfaction in knowing that he had withstood them.

"Remove that ape's filthy carcass from the conversion tube," Medea said, "and hurry up about it."

"He's surprisingly strong, isn't he?" Beverly said. "Have you ever seen a human resist conversion like that?"

"He can't hold out forever," Medea said, but she realized that she might be guilty of wishful thinking.

"Can't he?" Beverly taunted, selecting a guinea pig under glass to snack on while she waited for the guards to bring Nigel's limp body out. "He could die before you get what you want out of him."

"He's revealed a few things to us already."

"But those things have all proven false when we've had them checked out." Beverly unhinged her jaw and swallowed the squealing guinea pig whole.

Watching enviously as Beverly gulped it down, Medea said, "As long as he believes we've got the girl."

"Sooner or later he'll demand to see her. He may already be suspicious."

"Possibly," Medea admitted.

"There's a way we can accommodate that desire," Beverly said.

"What are you talking about, Beverly?" Medea said, annoyed. "How can we bring the girl here if we don't know where she is?"

“I have an idea.” Beverly’s throat swelled as the guinea pig was slowly forced down her gullet.

Medea rolled her eyes.

“They have a saying on Earth,” Beverly said as if she hadn’t noticed. “ ‘If the mountain won’t come to Mohammed, then Mohammed will go to the mountain.’ ”

“I see,” Medea said, wondering what it meant.

Beverly grinned. “I thought you would,” she said.

Chapter 13

Someone was shouting at Gabriella. At first she didn't know who he was or where she was, but then it slowly began to come back to her. She was lying on the ground listening to birdsong, as if she were back at camp in Maine when she was a little girl. It was cold and foggy, and her back was sore from lying on the hard surface. She couldn't remember when she'd been so uncomfortable before.

Yes, she could. Yesterday. And the day before. And the day before that.

"Come now, lass," the man standing over her said. He was dressed in military fatigues, hands on hips. "It's time to rise and face the world." Gabriella sat up and stretched. The first grey light of dawn was creeping into the camp, but it was still difficult to see anything clearly. Around her, men and women were packing up their

sleeping kits, cleaning their AK47's and their Uzis, or making coffee on a fire of smouldering faggots. Kelly's tent stood in the fog a few yards

away.

She rose and folded her sleeping bag, joining the others at the fire. A cup of coffee was poured for her in silence by a beefy man with a scarred face. She accepted it and sat thinking about her new situation.

As far as she could tell, she was somewhere in the Republic of Ireland, though she had no idea of knowing what county. Like all of Ireland, it was wet and green, softly rounded mountains and peat bogs, the few peasants they saw looking like people from & hundred years ago. When people saw them, they tended to look the other way, as if the IRA weren't there at all. When asked, they would provide a place for the rebels to sleep, or even a slab of bacon and some eggs if they could manage it.

She wondered if they were this cooperative before the Visitors came. Many of them had been sympathetic to the IRA, she was sure, though their acts of

terrorism had been reviled publicly by the Irish Government. Old hatreds died hard.

At least the IRA was useful now, against the alien invaders. It was a joke among these rough men that the British, in their infinite wisdom, had created them, knowing centuries ago that the Visitors would come in the late twentieth century. They were indeed a formidable guerrilla force that the Visitors had not yet dealt with successfully. On the other hand, in spite of devastating forays into the enemy camp on several occasions, the Dublin Mother Ship still hovered over Ireland's greatest city.

"Good morning, Gabriella."

She turned to see Subhash approaching, outfitted in fatigues and a beret.

"Good morning," she said.

"And good morning to the two of you," Kelly said, approaching from behind Subhash. "There's somebody I'd like you to meet." Gabriella and Subhash shrugged and followed him to his tent. Kelly tossed the flap up and they crawled inside.

A dark man with a black beard and mustache sat cross-legged inside. He wore the same mufti as the other terrorists, and was lean and wolfish in appearance. His skin was as brown as Subhash's, but his face was as long and aquiline as Subhash's was round and friendly.

"I would like to introduce you to Colonel Abdul Alhazred," said Kelly. "A man who has helped to train our lads these past months." "Alhazred." Subhash shook the Arab's hand. "It is a pleasure to make the acquaintance of one so famous."

Gabriella had heard of him, too. A terrorist wanted for acts of international terrorism in a dozen countries. There had been much speculation that he was in Ireland, but British authorities had given the rumor little credence.

"Perhaps too famous," Alhazred said in smooth, public school tones. "From the Jordan River to Ireland is a long way for a man's reputation to travel. . . particularly when he is involved in such a secretive business as me." "Your reputation has gone much farther than that," Gabriella put in. "We have heard much about your exploits in America."

“Yes, the American media is very fond of me. Americans are always in need of villains, are they not?” Alhazred smiled, showing brilliant teeth. “But I have heard much of you as well, Ms. Nicks. You are a *cause celebre* all over the world now, the beautiful young woman who eluded the Visitors.”

“I couldn’t have done it without Shree Subhash,” Gabriella said.

“Ah, the courageous Mr. Subhash. The world has need of such a man now. We must all put aside our national and religious differences in these dark times . . . even an old terrorist like me. Whatever differences I have with the Jews shrink into insignificance with the threat of the invaders from the stars so imminent. Do you not agree?”

“Completely,” Gabriella replied.

“And yet most people will not stand and fight,” Kelly said. “So it ever will be. It’s left to the few to fight for the many.”

Gabriella couldn’t help but wonder if these men would fight no matter what the international situation. They seemed so natural in this military setting.

“Mr. Alhazred,” said Gabriella, “do you think there is a chance we can win?”

“There is always a chance,” Alhazred said with conviction. “If we did not believe that, there would be no reason to go on fighting.”

Gabriella nodded.

“But now it is time for your training to continue, I believe,” Alhazred said. He rose and gestured for the others to go out of the tent ahead of him.

Outside, the soldiers were already running the obstacle course. Gabriella and Subhash shouldered their Uzis and ran after them, ready to start another grueling day of training.

If they could help defeat the Visitors, it would be well worth it. And even if they could not, they would die trying.

Chapter 14

Nigel lay on a cot, tossing and turning uncomfortably as he tried to sleep. He had Ms doubts that the Visitors would ever let him out alive, but he found hope in the suspicion that the reptilian scum didn't have Gabby after all. His fevered brain clung to that notion as he tried to recuperate from the ordeal in the conversion tube.

He had promised them cooperation if they didn't harm her, but of course he had no intention of helping them if he could avoid it. Only if they really did try to do something to Gabby . . . something he need not worry about if she were not in captivity. And if she was their prisoner, why hadn't they brought her to him to prove it? Did they expect Mm to believe them simply because they had shown Mm a hologram of her capture? No, that could have been faked. He

knew that, even if they did keep Mm in a state of semi-consciousness with their torture and attempts at brainwashing. Medea dared speak of their agreement, but he owed them nothing, and they would get nothing from him.

A sweet smell pervaded the tiny cell, an intoxicating perfume that Nigel hadn't noticed before. Were they gassing him now? It didn't seem to bother Ms lungs, whatever it was. If they had decided to do him in by way of some poisonous vapor, there was nothing he could do about it. His suffering would soon be over, and he would never have to betray Ms country. The Visitors would doubtless kill Mm in the end, in any case.

The smell grew stronger, reminding Mm of the delightful scent of magnolias in New Orleans, where he and Gabby had gone on holiday the year before. It was a truly delicious aroma, evoking the most pleasurable sights and sounds and tastes . . .

The cell seemed to subtly change, perhaps the lighting or shadows created by the spreading, perfumed mist. Nigel couldn't be sure . . . but he had never dreamed that this tiny cubicle could contain so much magic and mystery.

Now the somber grey of the chamber was illuminated by pastel hues of blue and green and yellow and orange and red. A veritable rainbow to match the wonderful odour that filled Ms nostrils. He felt curiously light-headed, but nonetheless happy for that. He could think of

nothing that would improve on his pleasure.

The door to the scented chamber slid open. A shadowy figure entered. The dim light wouldn't permit him to see who it was, but there was something familiar about the shape of the head.

A woman.

"Hello," he said, his voice sounding marvellously mellifluous, or did he flatter himself to

think so?

The woman said nothing, approaching him through the scented mist as slowly and sensuously as a dream. She stood over Mm, a vision of womanly charm and beauty.

He knew her face. Gabriella.

"You're here," he said. "I didn't think they really ..."

Silently, she put her hand on Ms chest and trailed her long nails across Ms pectorals.

"It's all right," she wMspered.

"No," Nigel persisted in spite of Ms languid joy, "I don't want you to be their prisoner."

"I'm not, darling Nigel," Gabriella said. "They are our Mends, and I want to be with them. But 1 want you to be with them, too."

"What?" He must have misunderstood her. He was so sleepy he could hardly understand what she was saying at all. . . and her whispering made things even more difficult.

“You’ll see, Nigel. The Visitors are our Mends. They aren’t trying to defeat us, as the terrorists claim.”

“Terrorists?”

“Yes, the IRA are their bitterest enemies. Everyone knows that.”

He had been taught all his life that the IRA were evil. And yet it was true that they fought bravely against the Visitors, not just in Ireland, but in England as well. Some of their activities were even reported as far afield as Scotland and Wales. Their offensives against the Visitors had been far more successful than those of the British Resistance, everyone knew that. Did that mean that the British Resistance was wrong, too? There had been talk of joining forces with the IRA, mostly by Subhash. Nigel had even considered the possibility himself, going so far as to share intelligence reports with the Irish before his capture. Working with terrorist butchers! Father would disown him if he knew.

“Father,” he muttered.

“Your father has seen the wisdom of working with the Visitors,” Gabriella said, stroking his hair. “While the House of Lords rings with claptrap about Vichy France, the great victory in the Falklands, and the glorious history of Britain, your father is the cool voice of reason, advocating peace and cooperation with the Visitors.”

“No.” But Nigel knew it was true. His father had said these things. He was blinded by alien propaganda. “He just doesn’t see the truth. If he knew . . .”

“Then your father, who has spent his life in service to the Crown, is wrong, and the IRA terrorists are right?”

Nigel had never heard it stated so baldly. It was the moral dilemma he had suffered from for months while he helped lead the resistance. Did his father know things that he was not privy to? Things that would change Nigel’s mind about the validity of the resistance?

It was all too much to think about, right at the moment. He wanted only to revel in the company of the woman he loved, to wallow in sybaritic pleasures with Gabby and forget about the war on Earth. They floated far above the world now, adrift in a perfumed garden in outer space. This was no time for politics.

“Come to me, my love,” Gabby said.

He reached out to touch her, and felt her satiny skin against his fingertips. Everything else was forgotten as his eyes closed and he fell asleep.

Chapter 15

Subhash had always been a perfect gentleman, of course. Gabriella was glad of that. She was fond of him, and she owed him a great deal, but she was still in love with Nigel. She could not quite accept the fact that he was dead, even though she understood that it was true. Some part of her dared hope that he was still alive, even though he had died in her arms less than a fortnight ago. It was folly, she knew, and yet she could not help herself.

She believed that Subhash was falling in love with her, though it did occur to her that he was merely polite and protective towards her and that she misinterpreted his attentions altogether.

He sat next to her on the hard ground now, as sheep baaed in the distance. They watched Alhazred construct a time bomb. God, if the

folks back home in Philly could see her now, mucking about with terrorists and killers as if they were a bunch of yuppies gathering at a local club.

When the lesson was over, Kelly addressed them.

“We’ll be moving on in the morning,” he said. “There is a castle a few kilometers away that has been graciously loaned to us by a sympathetic party. We’ll continue training there for a few days until we’re prepared to strike against the Visitors.”

A murmur of approval ran through the thirty-odd rebels gathered around Kelly. They would bivouac in a castle tomorrow. No more sleeping on the ground. Gabby was getting used to it, though, and she was leaner than she had ever been in her Me. That was something to be thankful for, even if it had taken a lot of hardship to get in shape.

Suddenly one of the soldiers jumped up.

“Skyfighters!” he shouted.

All were on their feet, scurrying for cover as the vulturelike alien craft hummed overhead. Blue bolts shot out of its pointed prow, scorching the ground explosively where they hit. Gabriella heard someone scream as smoke billowed up in her face, choking her with its acrid fumes. She couldn't see Subhash, or anyone else for the moment, as tears blinded her. At least she still had her Uzi, its strap wrapped round her elbow.

The skyfighter hovered, firing methodically into the milling IRA men as they tried to find someplace to hide. Alhazred's tent went up in a burst of flames. Gabriella backed away from it, turning to run up the hillside behind the camp. She saw a man drop a satchel full of plastique and sprint for all he was worth. Others were firing their weapons at the skyfighter, but the bullets didn't even dent the ship's gleaming, white armour.

She had to do something. Looking around, she saw a huge dead tree with naked limbs outstretched. She ran to it and began to climb the tree while the skyfighter's stem was towards her. A moment later, she hung from a high branch.

Swinging out as though she were Tarzan himself, Gabriella let go the branch and flew through the smoky air. She caught one of the skyfighter's runners on the very end. Inching forward, hand over hand, she worked her way towards the portal on the skyfighter's side. She dangled from the ship, trying to manage her Uzi as her body swayed uncontrollably from side to side.

"Gabriella!" Subhash shouted from below, just now seeing her through the smoke.

Removing the safety, Gabriella pointed the Uzi at the portal and fired. The bullets whined as they ricocheted off the alien alloys of the skyfighter's hull.

A second burst yielded no better results, but the occupants of the skyfighter banked the craft in an attempt to shake Gabriella off. She was determined not to lose her grip, one arm under the runner and the other one over it, the Uzi clutched firmly in her hands.

The skyfighter swerved wildly, and Gabriella fired again. This time, the bullets ricocheted off the hull less than an inch from the portal. If she could just keep her bearings as the skyfighter banked . . .

The craft's pilot tried a new tack. He brought the skyfighter down towards the

ground, like a helicopter pilot. Gabriella could be crushed if she didn't let go.

The skyfighter dipped dangerously towards the ground. Those inside it had forgotten about the IRA men on the ground, their only concern now being Gabriella.

Her toes brushed the surface of the earth, and she closed her eyes. But the maneuver was a bit too tricky for the alien pilot. He brought the skyfighter up a few meters for fear of crashing it.

That was all Gabriella needed. She fired a burst that traveled straight up the line where the portal joined the hull. With a ***sprung***, the portal flew open, a startled Visitor falling out of the ship and nearly taking Gabriella with him as he hissed his way towards the ground in free fall. She helped him along with a kick as he sailed past her.

Gabriella chinned herself on the runner and pulled herself up. Balancing on the runner, she sprang, lithe and catlike, into the interior of the skyfighter.

"I wouldn't if I were you," she said to a Visitor as the reptilian creature reached for its laser pistol.

The Visitor tried it anyway, and Gabriella opened fire. Hit in the midriff, the Visitor spun and collided with banks of blinking lights behind the pilot's console.

"Anybody else?" Gabriella said coolly.

None of the three remaining aliens were eager to test her.

"Throw down your weapons," she instructed them.

They did as they were told, the lasers clattering at her feet.

"Now back off." She turned towards the pilot. "Bring it down to the ground," she said.

The pilot hesitated.

"Now!" she shouted.

With a resigned flick of his forked tongue, the pilot touched a light panel on the console and the skyfighter descended onto the hilltop.

Chapter 16

As Gabriella emerged from the skyfighter with her prisoners, the IRA men sent up a mighty cheer. She suddenly realized what she had just done, and could hardly believe it herself. Her adrenaline was still pumping, and her body would probably ache in a while, but right now she was exhilarated. There could be no doubt now that she deserved to fight in the IRA ... or the British Resistance, if it still existed.

The Visitors were taken into custody, their crimson uniforms brilliant against the green hillside as they were led away.

“Gabriella,” Subhash said, taking her hand, “I have never seen such courage. You were amazing, absolutely amazing.”

“Thank you, Subhash,” she said, the words

barely leaving her mouth before Kelly was beaming at her.

“Lass, that was a fair bit of high dudgeon,” he said.

Gabriella laughed. “Wonder Woman, eat your heart out.”

They all laughed with her, elated at the way things had tamed out, thanks to her quick thinking. An almost certain tragedy had not only been averted, but now they had a skyfighter and prisoners as well.

“Well done,” said Alhazred. “You will make a fine soldier, Miss Nicks, a very fine soldier indeed.”

She looked Alhazred in the eye. He was probably not accustomed to having women face him, but he didn’t seem to mind Gabriella’s attitude. She had, after all, done something none of the men—seasoned revolutionaries though they might be—had even thought of doing.

“I’m glad you approve of me,” she said. “I have been anxious to mix it up with the Visitors for a while now. I wasn’t about to miss this opportunity.”

“The lass is a tigress,” a man shouted. Kelly and the others roared with laughter. Only Alhazred remained silent as he continued looking deep into her eyes.

“She is more than that,” he said deliberately. “She is our greatest hope.”

And with that, he tamed and walked back towards the remains of his smouldering tent.

The men were no longer laughing. Instead, they watched Gabriella appreciatively and wonderingly. Subhash appraised her in a new way, too. Before this, he had been her protector. Now she was not only his saviour but the hero of the entire camp. Gabriella chuckled to herself, recalling that she had found it difficult to climb a rope in high school gym class back in Philadelphia.

When the fires were all put out, Seamus Patrick Kelly called them all together.

“We’ve got something now to fight those bloody lizards with on their own terms,” he said. “But we’ve got to get it away from here. The Visitors must have a rough idea of where the skyfighter was when Gabriella brought it down. I think it’s best we have the pilot fly it to the castle with a couple of our lads—or lasses—aboard. The rest of us will split up and go by land, meeting there tomorrow.”

“Who’ll be the lucky ones who get to fly in?” a man with a ruddy, scarred face asked.

“That’s up to you,” Kelly said. “We’ll take a vote.”

Everyone wrote a name on a sheet of paper and put it into a hat. Kelly looked them over for a few minutes and counted the most frequently cited persons.

“The tally stands at,” he said somberly, “twenty-three for Gabriella Nicks ...”

A cheer rose from the assemblage.

“... and seven for, humility nearly forbids me to say, meself.”

“There’s room for another aboard that ship,” someone bellowed. “Who’ll be the

third?”

A general murmuring was quelled by Kelly’s raised hand.

“I think we should permit our heroine to select the third,” he said. “After all, we wouldn’t have the bloody thing if it wasn’t for her.”

The group seemed to agree, and so Gabriella was left to pick the third traveler. What could she do?

“I’ll take Shree Subhash,” she said, wondering if the men would disapprove.

They didn’t appear to. Though she and Subhash had been outsiders before, any suspicion about them seemed to have vanished after the events of this morning. Things were working out well, but there was something she had to know.

“What of the other two Visitors besides the pilot?” she asked. “What will you do with them, Kelly?”

“What must be done with all enemies who are not useful to Us,” Kelly replied matter-of-factly.

Astonished at how coolly he sentenced the two aliens to death, Gabriella began to protest. “But that will make us no better than the Visitors,” she said.

“Perhaps so, lass,” Kelly replied. “But what else can we do with them? We cannot take them with us. They would only slow us down, and there would be a constant danger of them trying to escape. If they escape and are picked up by a Visitor patrol or a skyfighter, we are doomed, don’t you see?”

Unable to deny the truth in what he was saying, and yet unwilling to kill in cold blood, she said, “What if I make them my responsibility?”

“What did you say, girl?” Kelly cocked his head.

“You heard me. They’ll be my prisoners. Maybe I can find some use for them, even if you

can’t.”

Calmly removing his spectacles and cleaning them with a handkerchief, Kelly said, "Now, how do you propose to do that? Two lizards, who might not even sleep, so far as we know, and just one of you."

"It's a chance I'll take, rather than have their blood on my conscience."

"But you killed two of them already."

"I had no choice."

Kelly looked bemused by the distinction. It had doubtless been a very long time since he had been confronted with such idealism. Almost

wistfully, he put on his glasses.

"I'll think it over," he said.

"Thank you," Gabriella said as he walked away. As long as he was thinking it over, the Visitors would not be killed. It was important to her.

Chapter 17

A female figure emerged from Nigel Smythe-Walmsley's cell. She glanced back in at the unconscious man lying on a cot and then the cell door slid shut. She turned and strutted to the command center of the ship and found Medea waiting for her.

Medea's thin face broke into a conspiratorial smile, her forked tongue snaking out in pleasure. "You know, Beverly, it actually may be working," she said.

Beverly peeled the dermoplast pseudoskin off her neck and chin and pulled the human mask completely off. A moment ago, she had been the very image of Gabriella Nicks, though she had been a bit miffed when the drugged Nigel remarked that she had put on weight. Fortunately, he had been too far gone on the narcotic vapor to make more of it. She must stop eating so many

gerbils between meals, if only for the sake of her mission.

"I never had any doubt that my plan would succeed," she said. "And my idea of cloning Nigel Smythe-Walmsley worked rather well, too. Once the resistance thought he was dead, they were drawn to the girl."

"And the cost so far has been a number of our soldiers," Medea said caustically.

"Let us not forget," Beverly retorted, "the destruction of British Resistance Headquarters, shall we? Didn't Gabriella lead us right to that target? Or have I misinterpreted recent events?" "We destroyed a few resistance fighters and a mansion, but the bodies of Ian, Subhash, and Gabriella Nicks were never found."

"There were many bodies burned beyond recognition in the rubble," Beverly protested. "For all we know, all three of them were among the dead."

"You'd better hope they're among the dead," Medea said angrily. "If you manage to convert Nigel because he thinks you're Gabriella, and we send him out as an agent, the reappearance of the real Gabriella will certainly throw a

spanner into the works.”

“Very unlikely,” Beverly replied, but she couldn’t be sure. The idea of that dreadful girl showing up and spoiling everything was not an appealing one.

“Perhaps you won’t find it quite so unlikely

when I tell you that another of our skyfighters is missing.”

“Unfortunate, but what does that have to do with Gabriella?”

“I’ll show you,” Medea said, turning to the communications console. She ran her fingers over the light panel, and a hologram appeared, showing the inside of a skyfighter, the pilot-facing them.

“What is this?” Beverly demanded.

Medea didn’t answer, indicating that Beverly should watch the hologram to see what it was.

The skyfighter was rocking violently, as if some weight were dangling from it. Gunfire ripped through its interior. Suddenly, a portal burst open, and the soldier nearest it fell out of the skyfighter. An instant later, a lithe figure leaped inside.

It was Gabriella Nicks!

“It can’t be,” Beverly mumbled.

“But it is,” Medea said with grim satisfaction as she slammed her palm down on the console. The three-dimensional image of Gabriella, armed with an Uzi, flickered and winked out. “Therefore, we cannot send Nigel down to Earth again while she is on the loose.”

“That silly little bubblehead couldn’t conceivably have done that,” Beverly said, still unable to believe her own eyes. “Why, she captured a skyfighter single-handedly.”

“Yes, she did, didn’t she?” Medea was enjoying this, in spite of the loss of the skyfighter. She was not unaware of Beverly’s vaulting ambition, and she was not about to give up her command to this upstart easily, even if she had bungled

things in Florida and the American Southwest. She kept telling herself that it really hadn't been her fault either time, but Diana, commander of the Earth fleet, remained unconvinced. Medea knew that Beverly would report any failure on her part to Diana. Well, she wasn't likely to report this, since it would most likely be construed as Beverly's mistake.

"We'll track Gabriella down," Beverly sputtered. "Where was this skyfighter when it was captured?"

"In Ireland," said Medea. "Somewhere in County Kerry."

"Then we'll comb the countryside with skyfighters. We'll torture those peasants who won't talk. We'll track her down and take her, dead or alive."

"She's gone already," Medea said thoughtfully. "Unlike most of the other resistance forces on Earth, the IRA have experience with this sort of warfare. It's very difficult to monitor their activities."

"It doesn't matter," Beverly said angrily. "They're only a bunch of foul, stinking apes." "Sauriacentric babbling won't do any good," Medea scolded her. "We need action, not racist talk."

Beverly turned a cold eye on her superior officer. "Then you think the humans are our equals?" she asked.

"I didn't say that," Medea protested. "I know the official propaganda line, but it won't do any good in the field. I know. I've fought these creatures for quite a while now."

"And failed at both your previous missions, I might add," Beverly exploded.

Medea looked at her without losing her temper. "Yes," she said after a long moment, "I failed. But that was because I underestimated my enemy in both cases. I hope that I have benefitted from my experiences. Perhaps you will too."

"Platitudes," Beverly snarled. She spun on her heel and marched out of the command center, the human mask still in her hand.

Medea watched her go, thinking of calling Beverly on the carpet for insubordination. No, she would wait and strike back at the overstuffed

rhinoceros iguana when the time was right. Then Beverly would trouble her no more.

Chapter 18

The flight to Kramden Castle was without mishap. The pilot, with a laser pistol to his head all the way, tried no trickery. No other skyfighters were seen patrolling the green countryside, and no farmers took potshots at the lone skyfighter passing overhead. Gabriella mused that word might have reached them that it was in the hands of the IRA.

The turrets of the crumbling old castle were in sight now, framed against a sky of lowering clouds. Its walls were high, and it stood on a cliff over the sea.

“Bring her down into the courtyard,” Kelly instructed the pilot.

The pilot banked slowly as the skyfighter’s nose cleared the crenellated top of the west wall. Below, two men stood, and several long canvas-covered shapes were huddled near the north and

east walls. Gabriella wondered what these were. Munitions stores?

The sky fighter settled to the ground so gently that its occupants felt not the slightest jar as they landed. The hastily repaired portal was opened and Kelly led the pilot out first, followed by Gabriella and Subhash. One of the men who were standing in the courtyard approached them, a distinguished gentleman of about sixty, wearing a tweed coat, his grey-haired head bared against the sea breeze. The other man drew a pistol and took the alien pilot away.

“So this is the young woman who captured the skyfighter single-handed,” he said. “A remarkable feat. Extraordinary.”

“Thank you, Mr. . . . ?”

Mr. . . . “Just call Mm Sir,” Kelly said. “Sir doesn’t like to have Ms name used, in case there are spies about,”

“I understand,” Gabriella said, shaking Sir’s hand. She wondered how he could

hope to hide his identity if he owned the castle. Was it possible he was representing somebody else?

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Sir,” Subhash, always the gentleman, said as if the name were perfectly normal.

“And it is a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Subhash,” Sir replied. “We have heard much of your work in England.”

“Thank you.”

“It will take the rest of your men some time to get here, and so we will have a chance to get acquainted. Please follow me.”

They passed through an archway towards the main hall of the castle, Sir informing them that the things they had brought with them would be taken care of by the servants.

“I couldn’t help but notice those objects covered with canvas,” Gabriella said as they passed portraits of eighteenth-century lords and ladies.

“Yes,” Sir replied. “You’ll see what’s under the canvas in due course, my dear. But right now, why don’t you freshen up a bit and ready yourselves for a good hot meal?”

Though Sir had phrased this as a question, there was no doubt that it was really a command. He was clearly a man accustomed to giving orders and seeing them carried out. Well, Gabriella thought, he will probably show us what’s under the canvas in due time, just as he had said. If not, there was nothing she could do about it at the moment.

A servant appeared, an old woman who led the three guests up the stairs to separate bedrooms. Gabriella found hers to have ornate Georgian trappings with an enormous mirror and a polished armoire. There was a bath attached, which she gladly made use of after all this time in the field.

Much refreshed after her bath, she reentered the bedroom to find her bag and her few articles of clothing laid out neatly on the bed. There was also a light print dress and a pair of flat-heeled shoes.

“Sir seems to think of everything,” she said.

She slipped into the dress, somehow not surprised to find that it was exactly the right size. The shoes were fine, too, though a bit stiff; they obviously had never been worn before.

Closing the bedroom door behind her, she went down to the main hall, where Sir, Subhash, and Kelly were waiting for her at table. They all stood as she joined them.

“I trust veal is to your liking, Miss Nicks,” Sir said.

“Very much so, thank you.”

Before the veal came lentil soup and the wine, then there was squab, and finally the main course was brought in. The conversation was polite, much small talk being made. It was hard to believe that they were all involved in a death struggle with an alien race, the meal was so pleasant and leisurely.

A gelatin dessert was brought, and then coffee, which they lingered over for some time, chatting amiably.

“You must all be tired,” Sir said at length. “It’s been a long day for you.”

“That it has, Sir,” Kelly agreed. “And may I say that was one of the finest meals I have ever enjoyed.”

“Thank you. I’ll see the young lady to her room.”

All four of them went upstairs, Subhash and Kelly saying good-night as they went to their rooms. At her door, Gabriella thanked Sir.

“Oh, you needn’t call me Sir,” he told her, smiling.

“Then should I call you Lord Kramden?”

Sir looked amused. “No, no, my dear, Lord Kramden has graciously permitted me to use this castle. It would be impossible in England, what with all the Visitor patrols mucking about, to use a castle with such high visibility. However, the enemy seems uninterested in Ireland, by and large, though they do send their

skyfighters out to terrorize the populace from time to time.” “Yes, Mr. Kelly has said the same thing. He doesn’t expect that to last much longer, though.” “I’m afraid he’s quite right. We can’t depend on it, my dear. Let us hope that we have launched our attack on the buggers—please forgive my language—before they’ve caught on to what we’re up to over here.”

“If I may not call you Sir,” Gabriella said, “and you are not Lord Kramden, then what may I call you?”

“Why, call me Lord Smythe-Walmsley, my dear, for I was very nearly your father-in-law.”

Chapter 19

It took a few moments for Gabriella to stop staring and say something to Lord Smythe-Walmsley. “This is astonishing,” she finally managed to blurt out.

“Particularly since Nigel must have surely told you I disapproved of your wedding plans. Well, that’s no longer true, Gabriella. I only wish that my boy could be with us now.”

Lord Smythe-Walmsley’s voice broke with emotion when he said this last. Gabriella embraced him, tears starting from her eyes.

“There, there, my girl,” the old man said. “I was such a fool. If I had met you just once, I surely would have seen what a fine young woman you are. I thought he should marry an English girl, you know. Ah, well, I was a fool about more than that. I was Parliament’s main appeaser. Advocated reasoning with the Visitors, you know. Jolly lot of good that did.”

“I’m so sorry about Nigel,” Gabriella said.

“Of course you are, dear. Of course you are.” Lord Smythe-Walmsley patted her shoulder as he hugged her. “We must carry on the good fight now, in Nigel’s memory.”

“I loved him so much.”

“So did we both. I’m only glad that his mother is no longer alive, to see what’s happened to our boy.”

“We’ll fight them,” Gabriella said, “and we’ll beat them.”

“With such courage as yours on our side, how can there be any doubt that we’ll be victorious?” “Thank you for saying that, Lord Smythe-Walmsley,” Gabriella said, letting go of the old man.

“Please go on calling me Sir in the presence of the others. It isn’t that I don’t trust them, you know, but it’s been my policy since I became involved in this whole beastly business to keep my political identity separate from my resistance identity. It’s for the best, you know.”

“I’m sure it is.”

“However, I have a small request. I hope you won’t think me a sentimental old fool.”

“What is your request?”

“Only that, when we two are alone, you call me Father.”

Gabriella found herself deeply moved. “Of course,” she said, “Father.”

“Thank you . . . daughter.” He looked happy at that moment. “Now let us retire and dream on what it would have been like had you and Nigel married and found happiness.”

“Thank you, Father.”

The old man went off down the hall to bed, and Gabriella went into her room and shut the door.

In the morning, the first of the troops arrived. As they entered the courtyard, Gabriella was pleased to see that the two Visitors were still with them. Kelly had kept his word.

Soon they were all assembled, and Gabriella went down to see them, along with Sir, Subhash, and Kelly. The men were murmuring until Sir stepped up before them and cleared Ms throat.

“England and Ireland have long been at each other’s throats,” he said, “but now our two great nations face a common threat that must unite us, that points up the similarities between we two neighbors here on Earth. Now is the time to work together until the last vestige of the invader is wiped from the face of the Earth.”

The men cheered, and then they were brought into the kitchen and fed.

“That was an inspired speech,” Kelly said to Gabriella as they walked up steps leading to the east wall, “but I wonder if England will be so disposed towards Ireland when the war is over.”

“It’s that kind of thinking that will make it go on longer,” Gabriella said. “We must all trust one another.”

Kelly nodded. “Perhaps so, but it’s a difficult task to love the English after all these centuries.”

“Well, I’m glad to see you putting aside your differences, at least for the moment.”

“And speaking of differences,” Kelly said, “what do you propose to do with your two prisoners?”

“**My** prisoners? I thought they were yours.” “You captured them, Gabriella. They’re your responsibility now.”

“It’s just too bad we can’t let them go.” “Impossible.”

“There have been other Visitors who have come to see our side of things. They have often come over to our side. Perhaps these fellows can be persuaded to do the same.”

“Hmm, perhaps. Though I’ve always found that a risky way to run a war.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that a prisoner is more likely to say he’s agreeing with you than not, if he can see his way to gaining freedom.”

Gabriella shook her windblown hair out of her eyes. “I suppose that’s true,” she said. “I’ll try to be careful.”

“Please do.” Kelly smiled so sadly and warmly that she could hardly believe that he was a terrorist. It was a thought that often crossed her mind when she was talking to him.

She smiled back at him.

“We must do all we can to rid our world of this tyranny, as Sir tells us,” Kelly said thoughtfully. “Perhaps your way will help us more than eliminating them. We’ll see.”

“Yes, we will,” Gabriella agreed. “And with any luck, we’ll soon see what’s under those canvases.”

Kelly smiled knowingly. “True enough. Let’s hope the Visitors don’t find out before we do.”

Chapter 20

There was a great deal of shouting on the floor of the House of Lords, not to mention the gallery.

“I propose that the recently deceased commander of the European Visitor fleet, Kaspar,” intoned Lord Fotheringay, “be interred in Westminster Abbey, as befits a being of his stature. Further, this will show once and for all that Britain intends to cooperate with the Visitors.”

Everyone had seen it coming, but now that the patriarch of one of the most distinguished families in Britain had actually proposed such a thing, chaos ruled in the august chamber for several minutes.

“I must stand against you, sir,” said Lord Smythe-Walmsley, standing. His white wig seemed a symbol of purity to those who looked **on** that day.

“You, Smythe-Walmsley?” Fotheringay said in mock amazement. “You who have stood for law and order these past lawless months? You who have called for cooperation with our Visitor Mends? You who have been called an appeaser by the press? You stand against me on this issue? I find this difficult to believe.”

“You may find it any way you care to,” Smythe-Walmsley replied with seeming indifference. “Nevertheless, let the record show that I have objected to this sacrilegious notion.”

“You speak of sacrilege as though you have the ear of the Almighty Himself.” Lord Fotheringay’s round, red face was self-satisfied with this pronouncement. “And yet you stand before us, as mortal a man as any among us.” There was some laughter from the Lords.

“I speak of sacrilege, but I am not alone in this judgement. The English people will not sit still for the desecration of a shrine that has stood for centuries as the burial ground of those who have contributed most to the welfare of our great nation. This proposal does not merely constitute poor politics, it symbolizes

complete submission to an alien power. This is asking far too much.” “Are you saying, then,” Fotheringay queried, a glint in his bloodshot eyes, “that the Visitors are our enemies? That is tantamount to treason, since Parliament has welcomed them as our allies.”

“You twist my words, sir.”

Another outraged uproar came from the gallery.

Angered, Fotheringay tugged at his ermine cape. He was one of the most accomplished speakers in the House of Lords, and he did not care to be beaten with a few elegantly chosen words. Nevertheless, he would clearly have to do something to gain the favor of the crowd.

“May I be so bold, Lord Smythe-Walmsley, to ask a personal question?”

“Of what possible interest can my personal life be to our esteemed colleagues?” Smythe-Walmsley riposted.

“I shall attempt to clarify that very point in a moment, if I may have your forbearance.”

“Very well.” Smythe-Walmsley prepared himself for the worst.

Fotheringay looked around the chamber, even at the spectators up in the gallery, before he began.

“Sad news has come to us,” he began. “Lord Smythe-Walmsley’s son has been killed.”

A gasp, followed by a murmur, rose from the assemblage.

“You are perhaps surprised as well as shocked to hear such tragic news. I know that I was. However, the facts behind this particular tragedy are even more shocking than young Smythe-Walmsley’s death.”

The crowd fell silent, wanting to hear more, afraid that they would miss whatever was to come. Fotheringay, they knew, could be counted on for good theater, and they hoped he would not disappoint them this afternoon.

“What are you getting at?” demanded Lord Smythe-Walmsley.

“It is very simple, sir. I charge that your son, the late Nigel Smythe-Walmsley, consorted with known terrorists and enemies of the Crown. What is more, he was engaged in a criminal act at the time of his death.”

“You he!” Smythe-Walmsley shouted.

By now, the chamber was in an uproar. It took several minutes for the spectators to become sufficiently quiet for the debate to continue.

“You deny, my lord,” said Fotheringay, “that your son was killed while engaging in treasonous acts?”

“I do not deny that my son has been killed.” Lord Smythe-Walmsley’s voice was now choking with emotion. “But I do deny that he was a traitor. My son worked in the best interests of Britain.”

“Then you believe that the best interests of Britain include overthrowing the established alliance between our nation and the Visitors.”

Smythe-Walmsley knew that this was technically a fact, due to the treachery and force of the Visitors. But he also knew that the British people were not kindly disposed towards the alliance. Tyranny was tyranny, no matter what face was put upon it. As yet, no one had dared stand up in the Houses of Parliament and say that. It was about time someone did.

“I do indeed believe that, Lord Fotheringay,” he said. His tone was quiet and yet strong enough to carry throughout the chamber.

Lord Fotheringay’s stentorian tones rang to the rafters. “Then you are an enemy of the state, and I say—nay, six, I demand—that you be put under arrest.”

The crowd exploded again, as two armed guards appeared and put their hands on Lord Smythe-Walmsley. They wore copper-colored Friends of the Visitors uniforms.

“Is there no one who will stand with me?” Smythe-Walmsley asked his distinguished colleagues.

They remained silent.

Proudly, Smythe-Walmsley permitted the armed men to lead him away.

Chapter 21

The media was **foil** of Lord Smythe-Walmsley's arrest, of course. He was the first national figure, outside of scientists and intellectuals, to be accused of treason since the Visitors had landed. He had been among those who had advocated rapprochement with the aliens at the beginning, but now he stood alone against them in the political world of London.

"They're painting him as a **hero!**" Beverly shrieked. "Look at this copy of the **Times**. Have you ever seen such nonsense?"

Medea glanced at the headline: "Smythe-Walmsley Arrested in Bold Stand Against Visitors."

"Don't they understand he's simply acting in spite, because of what happened to that brat of his?" Beverly screamed. "These creatures are so irrational!"

"I have often found that to be the case since I've been posted on Earth," Medea said absently. "They are very emotional, these humans, and that trait seems to be both a blessing and a curse to them. More of a blessing in the long term, I think."

Beverly looked at her superior officer strangely. "If you admire them so much, Medea, why don't you go over to their side?"

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" Medea spat back at her. "Then you'd be in command here." "I... I only want what's best for our mission."

"Of course you do, Beverly. That's why you've tried to undermine my authority ever since you were stationed here. You were only doing what's best for everyone."

"Well, of course. I am a loyal Sirian citizen, a soldier in the star fleet. I came to the London Mother Ship with nothing but the love of our planet in my heart."

"Save the speeches for our court-martial." "Court-martial?"

“If Lord Smythe-Walmsley turns all of Britain against us, then we are finished.”

“But we have Lord Fotheringay on our side. Surely that counts for something.”

“Fotheringay is a fine orator, and he commands a certain amount of respect among the people. On the other hand, it takes only one major incident to turn the public away from a

politician. The arrest of Smythe-Walmsley may very well be that incident.”

“But surely it can’t matter now that we have both Smythe-Walmsleys, father and son, in our custody.”

“That’s all very well, but if we gain no more state secrets from Lord Smythe-Walmsley than we have from his son, then we will have gained nothing at all.”

“They are illogically stubborn creatures.” “Yes, but once again, that works to their advantage.”

“Indeed.”

Medea ignored that, turning to her guards. “Bring the new prisoner to me.”

Two of the guards clicked the heels of their jackboots and turned smartly. They exited through a sliding door.

“We’ll soon see if the old man is any easier to deal with than the son,” Medea said. “He is a politician, after all. Surely we can make a deal with him.”

A few minutes later, the prisoner was brought before them. Lord Smythe-Walmsley was brought roughly to his knees by an enormous guard who seemed to take pleasure in the old man’s suffering.

“Your cruelty won’t do any good,” he said, trying to catch his breath. “I’ll never do what you want.”

“Won’t you?” taunted Medea. “Even if it means saving the life of your son?”

“Do you think me utterly addlebrained?” Lord Smythe-Walmsley said, uncowed

by the savagery of the guards. “You have taken my son from me already. There is no threat you can make that can sway me.”

“Bring him along,” Medea said.

As they dragged the old man out the sliding door and through the gridded corridors of the massive Mother Ship, Beverly followed along, intrigued by Medea’s methods in spite of herself.

A few minutes of wending their way through the tortuous passageways led them to Nigel’s cell. Lord Smythe-Walmsley stood next to Medea and Beverly as Medea touched a tiny indentation on the cell’s outside wall. The wall faded into transparency.

“Nigel!” Lord Smythe-Walmsley cried.

“It won’t do any good to call to him,” Medea said. “These walls are soundproofed.”

“But how can he be here?” Smythe-Walmsley asked, wonder and terror in his voice. “The coroner examined his body ... I identified it myself.”

“The answer is quite simple. We managed to capture him, thanks to a friend in the resistance. Once we had him here, it was a simple matter to clone him. We programmed the clone’s mind with enough information so that it could fool Gabriella Nicks into believing it was the real Nigel before it died.”

Gabriella has been tormented these past weeks by the thought that the man she loved had died in her arms, thought Lord Smythe-Walmsley, just as he had suffered thinking his son was gone. But even knowing that Nigel was still alive wasn’t much of an improvement, considering the fine mess the two of them were in now. Only Gabriella and Subhash remained to carry on the good fight. So be it; he would give them nothing, even if they killed him. He only wished that Nigel could somehow come out of this alive. Not bloody likely.

“What have you done to my boy?” he demanded.

“He is unharmed,” said Medea. “But he won’t remain so unless you do as we ask.”

“I won’t betray my country.”

“You don’t have to. All you have to do is make a speech.”

“Saying what?”

“Recant what you said yesterday on the floor of the House of Lords. Say that you are in favour of Kaspar’s burial in Westminster Abbey.”

Chapter 22

“Things have got too far out of hand over there.” Kelly shook his head. “I always thought the Brits had more fight in them than this. To allow those filthy lizards to take the one man who still stood against them.”

Gabriella was certain that Kelly hadn't yet seen a photograph of Lord Smythe-Walmsley yet. He hadn't yet equated Sir's trip to London with the story in the *Irish Times*, which he had been reading here in the castle's drawing room this morning. But then, why should he? She was tempted to tell Mm the truth, but a promise was a promise. She had told Lord Smythe-Walmsley that she would tell no one Ms true identity, and she saw no reason why she should not keep her word, even if he had been taken prisoner. It would only discourage the men to know such a '

terrible thing, she believed.

“The people are up in arms about what has happened to Lord Smythe-Walmsley,” Gabriella said. “Perhaps some good will come of it, after all.”

Kelly shook his head. “Not if we don’t take action soon, Gabriella. I’m afraid we’ve been too soft. All this talk of appeasement... If I may say so, Lord Smythe-Walmsley made his own bed with his talk of cooperating with the lizards, and now he is forced to lie in it.”

Gabriella couldn’t deny that Nigel’s father had been in favor of peace with the Visitors at almost any cost, but in the end he had changed his mind and stood bravely for a principle. Was it too late now, though, to stem the alien tide?

“Our own measures will become sterner,” Kelly said, “starting today.” He stood and walked to the window overlooking the courtyard.

Something in his manner made Gabriella join him. She looked out and saw the Visitor prisoners marched out into the courtyard by three armed men. The Visitors stumbled awkwardly, bags over their heads. They were jerked roughly to their knees.

The three IRA men held pistols to the bags. Three shots rang out. The Visitors slumped to the ground.

Gabriella, sickened by the cold-blooded killing, gazed at Kelly.

The IRA leader wiped his spectacles with a handkerchief.

“How could you do that?” Gabriella said. “How could I not?” Kelly responded with a question. “They are our enemies, and they must die.”

“But you said ...”

“I said I’d think it over, lass, and I did.” Gabriella said nothing more. Words would not bring back the dead Visitors, any more than they would bring back Nigel ... or his dear father, whom she had so quickly learned to love. For a while, she had believed that things could be different, that men like Kelly might take to heart the humanistic values she still clung to. But no, Kelly had hardened his heart so that there was no compassion left in it. The Visitors would never know

that these soldiers had been killed in retaliation for Lord Smythe-Walmsley's arrest. Kelly believed that it was enough that he and his victims had known it. He had enjoyed exercising the power of life and death over them. She wondered if he had ever really considered letting them live.

"I see the way you look at me, lass," Kelly said. "I know that you judge me as an evil man. But these creatures would bleed us of our life's blood. They would dine on our flesh and wash it down with the water they have drained from the oceans of our world. We must make them pay a price too dear to make it worth their while." Gabriella could not argue with his logic, only with his savage methods. He was like Ian, and yet he was not; Kelly was far more coldly calculating than Ian. She was not surprised at Ian's cruelty, for he wore it on his sleeve. And Ian had not flaunted murder in her face as Kelly did this morning.

"Why did you arrange for me to see this?" she asked.

"So that you would know what it is to fight for your country ... or for your world. This castle was built by our oppressors centuries ago, so long ago that the beginnings of our struggle are shrouded in myth. We'll never give up the fight. That much we've learned. You must never give in. You must give no quarter."

There was a mad glint in his eye, she now realized. Seamus Patrick Kelly was a man who must go on killing no matter who was in power. It was fortunate for Britain that he was at war with the Visitors at the moment. But what would he do if the Visitors were driven away tomorrow? He would return to his terrorist activities against the British, no doubt. Gabriella shook her head in dismay.

"You do judge me, then?" Kelly asked.

"I don't judge you, Mr. Kelly," Gabriella said softly, "I pity you."

He nodded. "Then perhaps you understand

more than I gave you credit for."

Kelly turned and walked away, seeming to bear on his shoulders the souls of all those whose lives he had taken. It was a terrible burden that he bore, and if he was indeed mad, maybe it was because he could not survive in this life if he were sane.

She left the drawing room and sought out Subhash. She found him taking target practice by the sea wall, shooting at cardboard cutouts of men.

“Gabriella,” he said as she approached, putting down his pistol, “how are you this morning?”

“Not very well, Subhash,” she said. “I think I’m only starting to realize what I’ve got myself

into.”

Subhash glanced towards the courtyard. “You saw, then?”

“Yes.”

“It is a terrible thing, to see death at close range,” Subhash said softly. “And yet there is no other way to conduct this dreadful business we are about. It is good that you can still feel for the enemy. You have not yet lost your humanity.”

“That’s what frightens me, Subhash,” Gabriella confessed. “I fear that I will become like Kelly, a cold-blooded killer.”

“No,” he said, and put his arm around her. Together they took a walk away from the castle,

down to the beach. They didn’t speak, and only the cries of the gulls and the shushing of the surf could be heard.

Chapter 23

Robert Walters waited at the tube for a man whose name he didn't know. He lingered so long on the platform that he feared he would be noticed by the authorities before his contact arrived.

"Mr. Walters," a voice said from behind him.

Frightened, Robert turned slowly. There was no telling if it was the man he was expecting or one of these bloody terrorists one was hearing so much about. Like the ones who had captured poor Gabriella after she'd been to see him the other week.

A thin, blond man stood next to him on the platform. No one else was about, since it was a quiet part of the afternoon before the financial district let out, and long before the working class would plant their dirty boots in the trains.

"Hullo," said Robert.

"Shall we take a walk, then?" the blond man asked politely. "The air will do us good."

They chatted as they made their way up to the surface. Soon they were strolling along Bishopsgate, enjoying the afternoon sunshine.

"I don't think we're being followed," the blond man said, glancing casually behind him.

"No, I shouldn't think so," Robert said. "Not yet, at any rate. Though God knows I may have the IRA 'on my tail,' as they say in old American films."

"What makes you think so?"

"One of my more radical students has informed me that an American woman has joined the IRA, and that she has captured a skyfighter single-handed."

“A likely story.”

“I thought so, too, until I heard the woman’s name.”

“Don’t tell me.”

“Yes, Gabriella . . . the female freedom fighter. Practically another Che Guevara already.” “What an extraordinary development. Do you think there’s anything to it, Walters?”

“I shouldn’t be at all surprised, the way she slipped out of our grasp here.”

“Medea won’t be pleased.”

“Medea,” Robert mused. “Why, of all the female names on Earth, do you suppose she took such a forbidding one?”

“Just a coincidence, I suppose. Doesn’t know
the culture very well.”

“Are you sure?”

“Good heavens, no. Just guessing, old thing.” “Then she might know about murdering the children and all that?”

“It’s possible, I suppose. But see here, old boy, you haven’t called me down here today to speculate idly on Medea’s choice of a human name, have you?”

“Of course not.”

“Why, then?”

“If Gabriella has turned into a killer—and the telly confirms that at least one died in the hijacking of that skyfighter—then she’ll be coming after me before long.”

“Have you taken leave of your senses, man? If that is in fact Gabriella Nicks, she’s in Ireland. How can she come after you if she’s not even in the bloody country?”

“If she can do the things she’s done, there’s no telling what else she can manage.”

“Rubbish.” The blond man stopped to admire the flowers at a vendor’s stand.

“But Nigel used to tell me about what a strong will she has. About how she would succeed against the most formidable odds no matter what she was about.”

“Nonsense.” But the blond man didn’t appear as certain as his words.

“Perhaps so, but I don’t want to take the chance.”

“Then what is it you want, Robert?”

“I want to be taken to the new HQ, where I’ll be safe.”

“Safe?”-The blond man laughed. “How safe was the last place? Didn’t you hear what happened?”

“That I did . . . but I noticed that you escaped the destruction somehow.”

The blond man grinned at him. “My family have always been lucky, ever since the rope broke when they were hanging my great-great-grandfather for a horsethief.”

Robert was not amused.

“Come now, lad, are you afraid of a young woman who’d never seen a shot fired until a few weeks ago?”

“As a matter of fact, I am,” Robert admitted. “When I became involved in all this intrigue, I was told there would be no violence on my end. I’ve done everything you asked, and now this woman is on the loose, perhaps looking for me at this very moment.”

The blond man rolled his eyes.

“Please,” Robert whined.

“Oh, all right, if you’ll just promise to be quiet and do as you’re told, I suppose I can take you along.”

“Oh, thank you. Thank you so much.”

“Yes, yes.” The blond man waved his hand in a dismissive gesture, not wanting to hear any more about it.

“At last I shall know what your name is,” Robert said.

“What makes you think so?” the blond man demanded.

“Well, I can’t imagine being at HQ and not hearing the other men call you by name.”

“I suppose not.”

“Well, what is your name, then?”

“Ian,” the blond man said, smiling again.

Chapter 24

“Our people in London, tell us that word is out you’re still alive,” Kelly said, overseeing the work being done on the skyfighter.

“But how could that be?” Gabriella was astonished.

“Let me show you.” He stepped up onto the ramp and gestured for her to follow Mm. A moment later they were inside the skyfighter.

“Do you see that console?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“There was a visual communication device sending a signal back to the Mother SMp.”

“Then they saw what happened.”

, “Yes, but the pilot didn’t try to turn the outside camera on, for fear that we would notice it, doubtless trying to save Ms own scaly neck. That means the Visitors know we’re in Ireland, but they would know that anyway. The one bad thing about it is that they know you were the one who captured the skyfighter.”

“And so they also know I’m with the IRA now. Well, I’m glad they know,” said Gabriella. “Let them. I never did intend to hide from them any longer than I had to. Let them know I’m their enemy.”

“Well spoken, lass. But in our line of work, it’s useful to be secretive most of the time. Though I’ve been in the IRA since I was a boy, no one knows it except for a few hand-picked men and women.”

“If they’ve seen me, then it’s no secret I’m here. There’s nothing that can be done about that now.”

“I suppose not,” Kelly said. “But perhaps there’s a way we can turn it to our advantage.” “How?”

“Suppose that you appear next in Scotland, or in Wales, or in Liverpool or Newcastle. Then they’d be so busy keeping up with you that we need not fear them finding Castle Kramden.” Gabriella laughed. “That’s a wonderful idea, Mr. Kelly, a wonderful idea.”

Kelly sat at the skyfighter’s control console. “Perhaps you could take Subhash and a couple of the lads along with you. That way, if there was any real trouble, you’d have enough firepower to get you out of it.”

“I admit that I’ve been growing impatient,” Gabriella said. “This is probably the best thing I can do until we’re ready to put your plan into action.”

“Well, you know, that isn’t my plan,” Kelly said, his brow furrowed. “It’s Sir thought of it. Now, what do you suppose is keeping him?”

Gabriella said nothing. If she remained silent, she would not be lying. And yet, the IRA had to know the truth sometime. Otherwise, their plans would remain up in the air, and the opportunity to strike back at the Visitors would be lost. She was in a quandary, but she would nevertheless keep her promise to Sir, at least until the situation grew truly grave. Besides, Sir might only be in captivity in an English jail, for all she knew.

“No!” Lord Smythe-Walmsley screamed.

Blinding blue light whirled around him. He could see nothing else, and he felt nothing but pain lancing through his body. Knowing nothing but the agony, he only hoped that it would stop before he died.

It did. Smythe-Walmsley collapsed, but he was still alive.

Two Visitors entered the conversion chamber and carried him out. Since he was unconscious, Medea and Beverly felt free to talk in front of him.

“Put him in that chair,” Medea commanded the two soldiers in their native Sirian tongue.

They did as they were told and stood back, awaiting further orders as their two

superiors talked.

“Threatening his son didn’t work,” Beverly said, “and neither did threatening his life. Even conversion failed.”

“Conversion often fails with strong-willed individuals,” Medea told her. “But I have something else in store for him.”

“Oh?” Beverly was annoyed that Medea hadn’t run out of ideas. If Medea made a hash out of the British invasion, then she would be succeeded by her second-in-command, as was the custom. Unfortunately, things were going rather well for Medea, all things considered.

“Go after the other,” Medea instructed the two soldiers. “Bring him here.”

They saluted and marched off to do her bidding, as Medea called for a physician.

“Revive him,” she commanded.

The physician—a specialist in exobiology —examined Lord Smythe-Walmsley for a moment and then opened a small case containing smelling salts. He held a tiny vial underneath the old man’s nose and Smythe-Walmsley’s eyes popped open. He groaned once and then sat up straight in his chair.

“What do you want of me now?” he said. “No matter what you do, I won’t cooperate with you.” “That does indeed seem to be the case,” Medea said. “I’m afraid you are simply too stubborn to part with any of your government’s

secrets. However, you might yet be persuaded to side with Lord Fotheringay on the subject of Kaspar’s burial in Westminster Abbey.”

“Might I, indeed?” Lord Smythe-Walmsley set his jaw, determined not to agree to anything of the kind.

“Well... I can see that your mind’s made up,” Medea said, “but perhaps *his* mind is still open.”

“Who are you talking about?” Beverly asked.

“Not my son,” said Lord Smythe-Walmsley. “I’m certain that he would never do

such a thing.”

“You are quite right,” Medea agreed. “But there is another.”

Medea looked past Lord Smythe-Walmsley as a man was led into the room by the two soldiers. Beverly’s hinged jaw gaped in astonishment.

Slowly, Lord Smythe-Walmsley turned to see what they were staring at. He looked straight into the eyes of a man who looked exactly like him.

He had been cloned.

Chapter 25

Robert had never seen such a band of ruffians. He didn't feel much better off with these declassé resistance fighters than he had on his own. But he hadn't been hunted down by Gabriella Nicks yet, of course.

"Pass the salt," a pimply-faced youth with a multi-hued Mohawk said.

Robert did as he was asked, reflecting that Ian must be feeding half the punk population of London now that British Resistance HQ had been wiped out. Well, Ian had to have a force of "men" for the sake of appearances. Otherwise, he would be useless to Medea.

"Good God," Robert grimaced as he tasted the stew. It tasted like something that would lubricate an automobile.

"Don't taste so bad, mate," the punk opined.

"Me mum can't cook no better."

Robert shuddered, and tried to consume another spoonful of the beastly stuff.

"Of course, me mum never could cook," said the punk, gazing wistfully at his spoon. "Enjoying your dinner?"

It was Ian, standing behind them as they sat on the ground eating their stew.

"A genuine gourmet treat," Robert said dryly. "Well, you could have stayed in the city, lad," Ian pointed out to him. "If you've finished your meal, come along with me, please. There's a matter that we need to discuss."

Robert set down his tin plate and cup, rose, and attempted to straighten out his aching back. Mumbling to himself, he followed Ian until they were off a safe distance from the men.

"We have news of Gabriella," Ian said, wasting no time.

Robert was silent, waiting for the worst.

“She struck in Glasgow day before yesterday,” said Ian. “A squadron of Visitors were attacked by her and an Indian man.”

“Subhash,” Robert said.

“One would assume so.”

“Did she escape?” Robert asked.

“Yes. It seems that the local people rose up and protected her from the Visitors. She’s become a symbol of the resistance, you know. Sort of an American Jeanne d’Arc.”

“That silly creature? Extraordinary!”

“Stranger things have happened, I assure you.”

“As you might imagine, I can hardly wait to hear about them.”

“Yesterday she was in Liverpool, up to more deviltry.”

“Moving south?” Robert said, an edge in his voice.

“Possibly ... at any rate, we shall see soon enough what she’s up to. I think it best to wait and see.”

“Wait and see?” Robert’s voice rose in alarm. “Shall we wait and see if she and that blasted Hindu come here and kill me?”

“Try to control yourself, old thing,” said Ian. “We’ve enough men to protect you from her, if she should have the gall to show herself.”

“No doubt that is what the lizards in Liverpool and Glasgow were saying a day or two ago.” “Come now, Robert. Losing what little nerve you have? You don’t even know the girl is after you.”

“She’s back in England, isn’t she?” Robert whined. “What further evidence do you need?” “She’s picked a roundabout way to find you, working her way through Scotland and down to Liverpool.”

“She’s coming closer every day, isn’t she?” “Well, yes, but that proves nothing.”

“It bloody well proves she’s on my trail!” Robert shouted.

“Keep your voice down, Robert. The lads will hear you.”

“Let them!”

“I warn you, Robert,” said Ian. “I’ll have you restrained if you don’t stop this nonsense at

once.”

Robert turned his face away for a moment, and then he turned and faced Ian with hatred in his eyes.

“I don’t think you’ll do anything of the kind,” he said. “Not unless you want these lads to know of your special relationship with Medea.”

“Good God, you can’t be serious!”

“I’m perfectly serious, Ian. I’ll tell them everything. They might not be much of a fighting force, but I doubt they’ll take kindly to your double-agent status.”

“And what of your own?”

“Do you really think they’ll believe a raw recruit like me could be in this thing with you and the Visitors?”

Ian knew that Robert had him here. He had no desire to find out if the former tutor was right in his assumption. It was better to humour him now, and wait for the hysterical fellow to provide him with an opening. There was time.

“Very well, Robert,” he said. “What do you want me to do?”

“I want you to put Medea onto this threat, and have Gabriella Nicks destroyed. It’s as simple as that.”

“As simple as that, is it? And what do you suppose the Visitors are doing now? Do you imagine that they intend to let Gabriella run loose forever? Don’t you think they’re trying to catch her? They never know where she’ll be next, what with her connections to the IRA.”

“I don’t give a damn what you say,” Robert shrieked. “If you don’t see to it that they get rid of her, I’ll tell what I know.”

“I’ll do what I can.”

“You’ll do better than that, if you know what’s good for you.” And with that, Robert turned and stalked away, the dirt showing on the creased back of his jacket.

Ian sighed, thankful that Robert’s panic had made Mm use such a threat. There was never any doubt that Robert would have to go, since he was the only one who knew about Ian and Medea—human or Visitor. Robert’s ultimatum would make it just that much easier to take care of him.

Chapter 26

No matter how much Beverly pried, Medea had the satisfaction of knowing things that her second-in-command was unaware of. For example, she had never told Beverly about her contact in the highest ranks of the British Resistance. Beverly had been curious as to how Medea was able to obtain the information leading to the capture of Nigel Smythe-Walmsley and the destruction of British Resistance Headquarters.

Let her wonder, Medea gloated. Ian was her little secret. He communicated with her on a private channel, its signal unbreakable. So much for British Resistance. They had been a force to reckon with at one time, but now they were powerless.

If only she could say the same for Gabriella Nicks and the IRA.

She waited now for word from Ian in her private quarters aboard the Mother Ship.

A hologram began to take shape, its contours fluctuating like the edge of running water. The image focused, and Ian's smiling face appeared floating in the air in front of Medea.

"You've done well, Ian," she said, "and you'll be rewarded for it."

"Thank you, but I'm afraid the arrest of Lord Smythe-Walmsley has worked against you." "Don't concern yourself with that." Medea smiled wickedly. "He'll be released tomorrow ... **a** new man."

"I see. Then Kaspar will be buried in Westminster Abbey?"

"Did you ever doubt it?"

Ian, traitor that he was, seemed to resent that comment. He knew the English people better than Medea did, of course. "There were one or two moments when I doubted you'd succeed," he said. "And remember, you haven't buried Kaspar there yet."

Medea hissed contemptuously. “You still don’t perceive the extent of our power.”

“We’ll see,” Ian allowed. “The British people have a stronger will than you know, I’m afraid.” “Then perhaps you should not have turned your back on them,” Medea snarled.

“Oh, I don’t believe they can hold out against von forever,” Ian said hastily. “But this isn’t what I wanted to speak to you about.”

“What, then?”

“It’s about one of my men, an informer. He’s afraid that Gabriella is coming after him personally in revenge. He betrayed her after Nigel died, you see.”

“Ah, then this was the man who watched Nigel Smythe-Walmsley for us.”

“Yes, his name is Robert Walters.”

“Why does he fear Gabriella Nicks so, when she is nowhere near London?”

“He’s had an attack of conscience, I think,” said Ian. “The next thing he’ll do is turn around and betray us.”

“Betray the betrayers? An odd scenario.”

“I’ve seen it before,” said Ian.

“Have you?” Medea thought it over. Now that Gabriella knew whom Walters was working for, he served no useful purpose, it was true enough. And yet, he might be good for some future espionage. She said so to Ian.

“He’s threatened to expose the whole thing if I don’t do as he says,” said Ian.

“How much does he know?”

“Enough to ruin me as a double agent.”

“You told him too much, then.”

“Nonsense,” protested Ian. “I had to let him know a few things in order to enlist

him in the first place.”

“Why didn’t you deal with Nigel Smythe-Walmsley yourself, you fool?”

Ian looked uncomfortable after that question. “Nigel didn’t trust me. It was impossible for me to gain his confidence, but he’d known Robert for many years. They were at university together. Robert always claimed his subsequent failure was a result of the class system, not of any lack of merit on his part.”

“I see. It seems a man like him might yet serve us, if he’s so full of resentment.”

“But he’s threatened to tell everything he knows!”

“Let me talk to him,” said Medea. “I think I can keep him on our side. After all, if he tells all he knows he’ll be implicated, too. I don’t think he wants that. . . just a guarantee of safety against the wrath of Gabriella Nicks.”

“But how can we guarantee such a thing?” “Gabriella will be caught and brought to justice sooner or later. Until that time, Robert Walters will be a guest on our ship.”

A slow grin spread over Ian’s fine features. “That’s a fine idea, Medea, a fine idea.”

“I thought you might like it. Bring him to the communicator and I’ll speak to him.”

“Right this minute?”

“Yes, be off with you.”

Ian rose and disappeared for a moment, leaving nothing to look at but the canvas flap of his tent. While he was gone, Medea considered her options. Things had changed since the destruction of British Resistance HQ. Now Ian was of little use, his problems wasting more time than they were worth. Perhaps it would be best for everyone if the remnants of the British Resistance were gone.

There would be a splendid opportunity for their disappearance very soon . . .

A Mghtened-looking young man sat down at the communicator.

“Mr. Walters?” Medea said.

“Yes.”

“You have nothing more to fear. We are taking you under our protection so that the mad terrorist Gabriella Nicks will be no threat to you from now on.”

Chapter 27

Nigel couldn't remember how long he had been in this tiny room. His mind never seemed focused in all the time he was here . . . and that was beginning to feel like eternity.

The only things that made it bearable were Gabby's visits, and even those didn't seem quite right most of the time. He supposed he was being too finicky and yet he could swear there was something different about her. If he could just think more clearly—it seemed as if the ubiquitous mist were filling his mind as well as this room. He could hardly remember a time when the mist wasn't here, but there was a time when he had been taken out and put in a chamber.

He had thought of Father then, the time that Father had been unable to attend his birthday party when Nigel was a little boy. The sense of

betrayal was still strong when he remembered that day.

The door to his room slid open and a man was standing there. It was Father. Was he dreaming? At the very moment he had been thinking of Father, Lord Smythe-Walmsley himself was walking into the room. Yes, it must have been a dream. He knew that Father was far, far away, though he couldn't say just where far away was. For that matter, he couldn't even say where he was, except that he was in this room full of mist.

"My boy," Father said, standing in the mist like an apparition from another world.

"Father ... is that really you?"

"Yes."

"What are you doing here?"

"Why, I've come to see you, my boy. I'm your father, you know."

“But you can’t be here.”

“And why not?” Father smiled benignly.

“Because ...” Now that Father asked, he couldn’t seem to remember exactly why he was so surprised.

“I’ve been away for a little while, but now I’m back,” said Father. “After all, today is your birthday.”

“Today? ...” He had been thinking of Ms birthday. Why? Because it was today, or was there some other reason? “I can’t remember very clearly,” Nigel said at last.

“Surely you remember the party we had,”

Father insisted. “All your little Mends were there, and the vicar, and Mother and Auntie . . . and the servants, too, of course. There was a cake and party favours, and you blew out all seven candles. Everyone had a wonderful time.” “Yes,” Nigel smiled. “Yes, I remember now . . . but I thought you weren’t there, Father, and I was very sad.”

“What rubbish, my boy! Of course I was there. Don’t you remember my gift?”

“I . . . don’t know.”

“Surely you do. ’Twas a bear, a big stuffed fellow that you showed off to everyone.”

“Oh.” Now that he was reminded, he did seem to remember a teddy bear. But he didn’t remember Father giving it to him in person. Was there something wrong with his memory?

“Ah, but you’re tired, Nigel,” Father said, “and here I am, keeping you up with all this chitchat.”

“No, Father, I don’t mind,” Nigel said. “I want you to stay as long as you wish.”

“Well, that’s very good of you, my lad. Of course, I can’t stay for very much longer. I am needed at the House of Lords.”

“Yes, they will need you, won’t they, Father? It’s selfish of me to try to keep you.”

“Not at all, Nigel, not at all.” Father tsked at him. “In fact, I’ve come in part to get your approval on an important vote.”

“Oh, and what vote is that, Father?”

“It concerns the burial of a foreigner in Westminster, something that is quite controversial.” “Where do you stand on the issue, Father?”

“I am inclined to let it pass. This particular foreigner has done a great deal of good for England, and for all of Europe.”

“And who might this foreigner be, Father?” “His name is Kaspar.”

Kaspar. Where had Nigel heard that name before? It seemed frightfully familiar, and yet the feeling the name evoked could hardly be described as positive.

“Well, what do you think?” Father asked.

“I... I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know? Haven’t I taught you to be a decisive man?”

“Yes, but ...”

“But what, my boy? Speak up.”

“But you also taught me to always go with my conscience, to not allow myself to be dissuaded from the truth . . . even by those I love.”

“And have I tried to dissuade you from the truth?”

“No ... I mean, I don’t know . . . I’m so confused.”

“Indeed you are, my lad, judging from the gibberish you spout.”

“Father, it doesn’t seem like gibberish to me.” “Very well, then. What do you think I should do?”

Nigel felt pressured for an answer. It was very

odd that Father would do this to him, but then, everything was odd these days. He had to have time to himself, to think. If only he could think clearly.

“I have to have time to consider what you’re saying,” he said at last in a deliberate tone.

Father looked surprised. “But it’s such a simple thing, my boy. It shouldn’t require more than a moment’s thought.”

“Nevertheless, I must think it over.”

“If you insist,” Father said. “I’ll leave you to your thoughts now.” He walked towards the door. It slid open, and just before he stepped outside the room, he said, “But I’ll be back.”

Chapter 28

“We’ve fooled his own offspring,” Medea gloated. “Fooling the rest of humankind shouldn’t be at all difficult.”

“You forget that his son was drugged,” Beverly reminded her.

“Yes, but no one else will get close enough to him to detect any difference. Lord Smythe-Walmsley will make his speech from the floor of the House of Lords, and then there will be no significant political voice to stand against Kaspar’s interment in Westminster Abbey.” “Maybe you’re right, Medea.”

“Of course I’m right, and our credibility will be restored in the eyes of the British public.” “Do you think so?”

“Of course. It was Smythe-Walmsley’s change of heart that caused all the trouble in the first place. Now that he’s going to go back to his original position, it is only logical that we’ll be vindicated.”

“I hope you’re right about this.” Beverly was worried that Medea was going to be successful after all. Things were going much more smoothly at this juncture than she’d expected. If this kept up, Medea would receive a medal, and Beverly would remain second-in-command.

“What have you done with the real Smythe-Walmsley?” she asked.

“He’s in a stasis pod,” Medea replied absently. “Shouldn’t we be trying to get more information out of him?”

“We’ll never get anything out of that old man, not even if we threaten to kill his son.”

“That’s what I was going to suggest.”

“That we kill Smythe-Walmsley the younger?” “No, just that we convince the father that we are going to kill him, not that we actually carry it out... at least not while Nigel is of any use to us.”

“What possible good can that do?”

“You know how emotional these apes are. If Smythe-Walmsley believes the life of his single offspring is threatened, he’ll be forced to do as we say.”

“Doubtful ...”

“But certainly worth a try.”

“Perhaps, but there is one flaw in your argument.”

“Oh?”

“If he doesn’t come round, we’ll have to kill Nigel, and we still might find a use for him.” She turned and stared at her underling. “There is a much larger issue at stake now, Beverly. Playing with the Smythe-Walmsleys is all very well up to a point, but we must concern ourselves now with this business at Westminster Abbey. If we are successful with this mission, it will look very good for us back on the home world.”

“I understand that this mission means a great deal to you, Medea,” said Beverly. “But we must look beyond it to the ongoing battle. One propaganda coup doesn’t win the entire war, you know.”

“Perhaps not, but I’m going to concentrate on this one mission for the time being. If we can pull it off, it will be hard for any resistance force to fight us effectively. It will seem unpatriotic, after one of us is buried underneath that hallowed cathedral. They take their past so seriously, you know. They’d really be much better off without it, as we are.”

“I can’t argue with that,” Beverly said. “They take such stock in the mixture of lies, half-truths, and myths they call their history!” “They are very primitive creatures, but they are full of fight, too . . . some of them, at least.” “If we can defuse those few who will stand up to us, then we’ll have them where we want them.”

“True enough, Beverly. That is what Kaspar’s interment is all about.”

“I see.” Perhaps, Beverly thought, Medea had more intelligence than she had given her credit for. She was engineering a psychological stroke that might very

well help the invasion immeasurably.

If it was as successful as Medea hoped, Beverly's prospects would be dim indeed. And Medea would never recommend her to a command post, not after the way Beverly had tormented her. She was left in the dubious position of wanting the burial mission to fail. That was a treasonous sentiment at best.

She'd better keep her mouth shut and pretend to be helping Medea, at least until the interment was over.

On the surface of Earth, the media was abuzz with the news. In two days' time, a Visitor would be buried under Westminster Abbey. The *Times* offered editorial comments that were polite but unfavorable, while the BBC offered on-the-spot coverage. The tabloids offered such headlines as: "Princess Di Related by Blood to Visitors."

There was little official grumbling, but Robert Walters felt a qualm or two as he looked over the newspapers. Had it really come this far, that the sacred resting place of England's kings and poets should be disturbed by these monsters? He would have felt ashamed had he not been a practical man. He had done the reasonable thing, he assured himself. Humankind could not stand alone against these aliens. They were too powerful, too technologically advanced for Earth to fend off their invasion. Yes, he had done the right thing . . . and yet, why did it feel so wrong?

Ian approached him and offered a cigarette. "Thank you," Robert said.

Ian lit his cigarette for him. "Reading about the impending funeral service, I see."

"Yes, it's tomorrow, you know."

"So I've heard." Ian lit his own cigarette and inhaled thoughtfully. "I've a bit of news for you, too, Robert."

"And what is that?"

"You'll be picked up by the Visitors at the ceremony tomorrow."

"At Kaspar's funeral?"

“Precisely.”

Chapter 29

A squadron of beefy Visitor guards hustled Lord Smythe-Walmsley into the House of Lords. The gallery was silent, the spectators waiting to see what their champion would say on their behalf today.

Rumors had been spreading like wildfire through the city that Smythe-Walmsley had changed his mind once again. Few believed this, since he was famous for never giving in to political pressure. The popular sentiment was that Smythe-Walmsley's rhetoric would spit in the eye of the Visitors once again, in spite of—nay, *because* of—his captivity. There was only the fact that he had been released willingly by the Visitors that made this scenario seem mildly implausible. And yet the people had faith that he would defy their alien conquerors.

Lord Fotheringay spoke first.

“It is with great joy that we gather in this ancient and honourable chamber today, for this is the day that we welcome back to the fold one whose approbation means a great deal to us all.”

The crowd began to murmur.

“Let us not wonder at the process of logic by which Lord Smythe-Walmsley has arrived at the position he holds today. Can there be one among us who doubts his patriotism, his love of the English people, his desire for Britain to take her place with the great nations of the world, as always?”

“Does that mean we must capitulate to the invader?” someone shouted from the gallery.

“Remove that man,” Fotheringay said coolly.

Two Visitors appeared and dragged the poor fellow away, kicking and screaming.

“I sincerely hope that there will be no further outbursts,” Fotheringay said.

The crowd continued to murmur, but there was no further shouting.

“To continue,” Fotheringay said. “There is no surer sign of greatness than the willingness of a man to admit to his mistakes. Lord Smythe-Walmsley stands before this august body in all humility and says that he is wrong. Can we ask more than that from any man?”

“Let him speak for himself!” a woman cried. A moment later she was carried out.

The buzzing of the crowd grew louder and more ominous.

“Very well,” Fotheringay said, cutting short his speech. “Without further ado, I give you Lord Smythe-Walmsley. ’ ’

A hush fell over the assemblage on the floor and the spectators in the gallery as Smythe-Walmsley, resplendent in his wig and robe of office, stood and addressed them.

“My dear countrymen,” he said in his unmistakable tones, “I have come here today to plead with you to try to understand what I have done. I allowed my personal grief and, yes, my pride to stand in the way of what I now know is best for Britain.”

The gallery remained silent, waiting for him to elucidate his position once and for all.

“It is with a heavy heart that I confess that I have done my country a disservice. I believe it is in the best interest of our nation to bury Kaspar at Westminster.”

The gallery exploded.

“He’s been brainwashed!” someone shouted.

“Do you know what you’re saying, Smythe-Walmsley?” another demanded.

“To hell with you!”

“Traitor!”

Lord Smythe-Walmsley held up his hands. “Think what you will of me,” he said, “but I have thought long and hard on the subject, and I can in good conscience say only what I am saying now. Kaspar must be buried at Westminster Abbey for the good of Britain . . . and for the good of the entire world.

“We must make our peace with our interstellar brothers and sisters. They represent a culture both older and wiser than our own, and we have no right to deny them their role of supremacy on Earth.”

There was no controlling the mob now. They were howling like banshees, hurling objects down at the floor, shouting obscenities like Americans at a sporting event.

Lord Smythe-Walmsley could not continue any more than his predecessor, Lord Fotheringay, had been able to. His red-clad guards surrounded him and drew their laser pistols, leveling them menacingly at the angry crowd.

“Please,” one of the Lords cried, “try to restrain yourselves.”

Few, if any, could hear him amid the uproar. Other voices tried to calm the spectators, but they were far beyond reason. They were by now consumed with fury at what they rightly believed to be some sort of fraud, designed to manipulate public opinion on behalf of the Visitors. Nobody cared any longer if Smythe-Walmsley was sincere or not. They simply did not, could not, agree with him.

Without warning, the Visitors began to fire their laser pistols into the crowd. Blue streaks of light arced into the gallery and burned through clothing into human flesh.

Screams of horror and outrage added to the confusion as people crawled over the wounded to reach the exits. The smell of searing flesh permeated the chamber as the Visitors fired into the helpless crowd again.

“Good God,” Fotheringay said. He had never expected anything like this. He had hoped to maintain order by cooperating with the Visitors. Now he watched them

cut down innocent people in the House of Lords itself.

“Please,” he cried. “Please stop this slaughter.”

But the Visitors continued firing until nothing in the gallery moved. Through it all, Fotheringay saw with mounting horror, Smythe-Walmsley watched with absolutely no expression on his ruddy face at all.

Chapter 30

Robert and Ian and the punk IRA members were at Westminster Abbey quite early. Robert was excited; today he would board an alien spacecraft, the only way he could be sure he would be safe from Gabriella's violent madness.

A crowd was already gathering, in spite of the fact that there were almost three hours before the ceremony. An area was roped off on the east to prevent the press of the crowd from spilling onto the grounds of the Houses of Parliament. It was quite a warm day, the sun shining brightly, unusual weather, and there would doubtless be an enormous crowd very soon. The numbers were already well over a thousand, gathering by the west doorway to the cathedral, where the ceremony would begin.

Of course, only a few hundred dignitaries

would be allowed inside the church. The rest would see them enter, and an announcer would describe the burial service over a public address system.

Ian and Robert stood in the shadow of the fourteenth-century building, their young punk charges roaming about through the crowd.

"They think they're doing something very dangerous," Robert said. "If only they knew we have the sanction of Medea herself."

"Most of them would probably be relieved," Ian replied. "After all, the majority of these lads are only along to cadge a free meal. They don't really want to see action against the Visitors." "Why don't you tell them the truth, then?" "Because they tend to be quite unpredictable. There's no way of knowing how they would react. One of them might take it into his head to give up his shiftless ways and become a hero. That would be the end of us, I'm afraid."

"I suppose it would," said Robert. "At least it would be the end of you, old thing."

“I’d have to seek sanctuary on the Mother Ship along with you, if that happened.”

“I should like that very much, Ian. Then I could play whist with you, or we could discuss literature, if that’s too dull for you.”

“Very funny.”

“Quite.”

“You won’t be so nasty once they’ve taken you aboard,” Ian said. “It’s really just your nerves, isn’t it? I don’t recall that you were ever quite so catty in the past.”

“I shall be greatly relieved to be somewhere Gabriella can’t get at me.”

“Yes.”

There seemed little to add, and so both men looked about. They passed through the grim crowd as if they were a part of it, there to enjoy the spectacle ... or to protest against the desecration of a national shrine, as many had come to do.

Ian didn’t expect the Visitors to take demonstrations against them lightly.

“How do you suppose they’ll do it?” Robert asked.

“Do what? Control this mob?” The crowd had doubled in size since they had arrived. Every minute, hundreds poured in from Smith Street on the west, Millbank on the east, Victoria and Peter streets on the north and south, respectively. There were ominous rumblings from many pockets of the huge mass of humanity as it swelled in the broiling sun.

“No, no, Ian,” replied an exasperated Robert. “I’m talking about the Visitors taking me aboard. How in the world do you think they’ll manage it?”

“For God’s sake, man, keep your voice down,” Ian cautioned. “If anyone hears you talking about joining the Visitors, this crowd could tear you limb from limb.”

“Sorry.” Robert realized how foolish he had been, talking so loudly about such a thing. “In my eagerness to escape Gabriella, I fail to see the immediate danger, it

seems.”

“Well, if you don’t shut up, you won’t need to escape her, old boy. We’ll die here on the grounds of Westminster.”

Nearly whispering now, Robert said, “You never did answer my question.”

“What was it again?” Ian asked, nodding at a weatherbeaten old fellow who held a sign saying, “Visitors out of England.”

“How are they going to take me to the Mother Ship without people knowing?”

“I don’t know, but Medea said it would be arranged, didn’t she? You’ll have to trust her now, won’t you?”

Robert, detecting the irritation in Ian’s voice, said nothing more on the subject. He was very nervous about what was to become of him. After all, it wasn’t every day that one left the planet of one’s birth and took up residence in an alien spacecraft over a mile in diameter floating over London.

The crimson uniforms of Visitors formed a solid line around the entire Abbey. With their laser pistols at the ready, they stood shoulder to shoulder against the incoming sea of humanity. Their human masks were so lifelike that it was difficult to believe that they were reptilian monsters from a planet orbiting the star Sirius, many

light-years away from the Earth.

There were representatives of the British Armed Forces as well, but they seemed to have been deployed as an afterthought, their numbers tiny next to the aliens’, all unarmed at that.

The crowd stirred. Something was happening. They turned away from the sun to get a better look at a motorcade proceeding up Victoria Street.

Chapter 31

The crowd was disappointed that it was not the Queen. Not yet, at least. She would undoubtedly be the last of the dignitaries to arrive, after the various Members of the Houses of Parliament, Lords and Commons; the military, all branches of the services; the archbishop; the Royal Family; and lastly, Her Majesty.

“It’s starting,” Robert said, seeing that his time of departure was drawing near. “It’s incredible, but the bloody thing is starting.”

“Yes, it is,” a young man standing next to him said bitterly. “What’s become of our country, when a travesty of our customs can go on like this, with the sanction of the heads of all our institutions?”

“Shush, man,” Robert said fearfully, “or those Visitors will hear you.”

“And do I give a damn if they do,” the man said. “I’ve had enough of their tyranny.”

“Here, here,” another fellow said, this one wearing the cap of a common laborer. “They’ve bullied us long enough.”

“Taking control of everything, they are,” said yet another person, this one a woman. “They’ve made slaves of us.”

“Not only of us, but of the entire human race.” The first man forced his words angrily from between clenched teeth. “Oh, they’ve tried to fool us, to make us think that they’re our friends, and you hear the bloody politicians claiming that we’ve got to bend to their will because they’re so much wiser than we. But are they any wiser than the Nazis, or the Soviets, or any other oppressors in the history of this world?”

“My dear fellow,” Robert said, “this isn’t Hyde Park, you know. Those aliens are

armed to the fangs.”

The motorcade had stopped just outside the west doorway, and a squadron of Visitors ushered Lord Smythe-Walmsley out of the first limousine. Smythe-Walmsley appeared to be confused. Media representatives from both television networks, and from America and other nations, tried to reach him with their microphones, but they were roughly shoved out of the way by the guards.

Smythe-Walmsley disappeared inside the cathedral.

Next, Fotheringay and two other Lords emerged from the second limousine. They walked in stately fashion along the red carpet, between two gilded ropes separating them from the masses.

“Traitors!” someone in the crowd shouted.

Fotheringay showed no emotion. He marched into the Abbey with his two companions, doubtless glad to be away from the crowd who hated him so.

Next, a number of high military officials entered. Robert had little interest in them, and knew none of their names. He had always considered the military as a waste of tax monies, little more than a lot of children in costume, pretending to be defenders of a nation that had long since lost its armed might.

Those posturing fools in their braid and swagger sticks passed by, lost in the darkness of the arched doorway. The crowd was still as they waited for the archbishop and the Royal Family.

Suddenly the bright sun was blotted out. It wasn’t a cloud, but a vast circular shape. Everyone looked up to see the London Mother Ship, immense almost beyond belief, hovering over Westminster Abbey like a presentiment of doom.

“They’ve anticipated trouble,” Ian said. “They’ll brook no nonsense here today.”

Skyfighters emerged from the curved side of the enormous ship, swooping round the spires of the ancient cathedral as if they were sent from heaven itself. But they were not angels—they were instruments of death.

Robert felt a twinge of guilt as he watched them soar and bank, patrolling the helpless crowd of outraged Englishmen and Englishwomen who watched their

birthright being sold out before their very eyes. But what were the rulers of England to do? There was no way to fight the alien invaders. They had already conquered Britain physically ... it remained to see if they could beat her emotionally. If they could break her spirit, make her crawl before them.

There was no doubt that this ceremony, defiling one of England's most cherished traditions, was all about that very thing. But it didn't appear to be working.

Would they fire into the crowd? Robert couldn't believe that they would. After all, he was here, and so was Ian. The Visitors needed them, didn't they? With a chill, he realized that the aliens might not see it that way. They knew that the resistance was little more than a joke, now that HQ had been destroyed. What did they need Ian for now? And if they didn't need Ian, where did that leave Robert?

Surely they would reward loyalty. But how could he be certain of that? These were not human beings, blessed with human ideals and emotions. They were beings from another planet.

Aliens.

Now that he was about to meet them face-to-face, the full import of that word struck home. How could he leave the Earth, the world of his birth? How could he leave London, for that matter? He had spent his entire life in the old city. How could he adapt to life with creatures who weren't even human, much less British?

But it was too late for such thoughts, he chided himself as the last of the motorcade disgorged its occupants. Strangely, he saw neither the archbishop nor any of the Royal Family. They should have been here by now.

A man spoke over the public address system.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, his voice reverberating across the grounds, "I regret to inform you that the Queen will not be able to attend the burial service of Kaspar this morning."

Chapter 32

The spokesman for the Queen waited for the chaos to die down. When the crowd was somewhat calmed, he continued.

“Her Majesty has sent a message on behalf of the entire Royal Family, stating that, and I quote, ‘This ceremony is not in the best interest of our great country. Though the Houses of Parliament have seen fit to approve the interment of Kaspar, We cannot agree in all conscience to do the same.’ ”

Another roar of approbation rose from the crowd.

“ ‘Britain finds herself powerless to stand before the interstellar giant who has brought her to her knees, but she will not bow before the conqueror. The bodies of a people may be enslaved by tyranny, but never the hearts and minds of the people.’ ”

Ian and Robert looked at one another in dismay. It was clear that the hurricane of human voices swirling around them meant that the crowd could not be contained for much longer. The Visitors drew their lasers.

There was going to be a riot.

“The *fool!*’ Medea screamed. “The *meddling idiot!*”

Beverly came very close to snickering. It was only her fear that she might be reported for insubordination that made her remain silent. Still, she was very pleased to see Medea’s smugness shattered.

“So, the vestigial tribal leader of these barbarians would stand against our might, would she?” Medea railed. “She is about to learn just how powerful we are, whether she realizes it or not.”

“What will you do?” said Beverly.

“What will I do, indeed.” Medea ran her fingers over the blinking lights on the command console before her. “What will I do? I’ll teach these apes a lesson they’ll never forget.”

A hologram floated in the ship’s command center, showing thousands of people, fists raised, shouting their support of the Queen’s statement. Two guards took away the speaker who had read it to the crowd. He did not resist them, and he even managed to smile as they took away his microphone and removed him from the platform.

“These filthy beasts!” shrieked Medea. “They show their fangs when they are happy, like the lower animals they are. How dare they defy me? How dare any of them speak out against us?”

“But what can be done?” Beverly taunted.

“I’ll show you what can be done!” Medea turned on Beverly in fury, her black reptilian eyes blazing. “Do you think the words of this bejeweled human female can affect me?”

Beverly didn’t say so, but she thought that the Queen’s words had affected Medea quite a bit.

“They’ll learn to trifle with me,” Medea said. “I have something here that will make an impression on their primitive minds.”

She deftly touched a series of coloured lights on the console.

“Is that . . . ?” Beverly wasn’t sure what it was.

“Yes,” Medea said with malicious glee. “The tractor beam.”

The Visitors and skyfighters were firing into the crowd, blue bolts of energy searing through cloth, skin, and bones, killing people at random. Their laser beams swept through the swarming mass of humanity, trying to hold them at bay.

A man held the Union Jack aloft. It waved in the breeze, its colors brilliant in the midday sun. A cheer rose from the collective throat of the thousands as they began to surge towards the wall of Visitors.

Continuing their laser fire methodically, the red-clad aliens stood their ground. Dozens fell, but the enraged mass of human beings would not be denied. They pressed forward like one huge organism that hungered for justice more than life itself

The Visitors began to back towards the Abbey. Their ring of red uniforms tightened, shrinking back to where they could retreat no farther. The crowd kept coming towards them. In a moment they would be overpowered.

The front wave of spectators stepped over the bodies of their fallen comrades, trying to get at the Visitors. More men and women fell to their merciless laser fire. There was no stopping those behind them, though. They closed in on the aliens in hand-to-hand combat.

One Visitor after another was falling, crushed under the avalanche of outraged Londoners. Signs were used as bludgeons to strike down the hated reptiles. It looked as if the day had been won by humans for the first time since Britain had been invaded.

Suddenly Westminster Abbey was bathed in green light. The combatants on the ground looked up in astonishment to see a swirling emerald cone projecting from the center of the Mother Ship.

Robert felt curiously light, considering the press of human bodies on all sides of him. Smoke from where the lasers had hit their targets curled up and spiraled into the cone. Plants came uprooted from flower beds. Signs flew out of hands. Coattails lifted straight up.

People were lifted off their feet by some unknown force. Robert felt it happen to him, too. He groped around for something to cling to, to hold him down to Earth, but he could only find someone's arm. The man he was attached to lifted off the ground, and Robert let go of him in dismay.

If he could just sink his fingers into the Earth, perhaps he would not float away. But all around him, screaming people were ascending. Above him were the heels of shoes, flapping pants legs and skirts, as the rioting thousands fell upward into the green cone.

They spiraled like so many leaves in an autumn wind, those at the top no more than tiny specks as they were sucked into the belly of the Mother Ship.

Robert gaped in amazement as he passed the twin western towers of Westminster Abbey on his way up. He felt himself spinning around in ever-decreasing circles as he rose, and he suddenly realized the full irony of what was happening to him. Medea was as good as her word.

She was indeed taking him aboard the London Mother Ship.

Chapter 33

Seamus Patrick Kelly watched in astonishment as the television showed thousands of people rising into the air, consumed by the ravenous spacecraft hovering over Westminster Abbey. Far below the victims, the Thames curved like a silvery snake as a news team in a helicopter shot videotape of the tragedy.

In the past twenty-four hours, Kelly had seen the awesome sight a half dozen times or more. He could not accustom himself to it, no matter how many times he had seen it.

“Monstrous,” he whispered. “Bloody monstrous.”

All of his life he had hated the English and the symbols of their nation. They had oppressed his people, his ancestors . . . and now they were the oppressed. He took no pleasure in knowing that.

This time it wasn't a single country that suffered, it was the whole world. The debacle at Westminster was only one of many such incidents in all the great cities of Earth.

He stood and looked out the window at the sea. Sir had not returned; most likely he never would. It was up to Kelly alone to decide when they would strike.

It had to be soon. The Visitors were no doubt congratulating themselves on the way they had handled the demonstrators at Westminster. In the flush of victory, they would not expect an attack.

But just how to strike at them, to hurt them badly . . . that was the question.

A soldier came into the room.

“Yes,” said Kelly.

“Sir, Gabriella and Subhash are here.”

“Here? The last I heard they were in Manchester.”

“Nevertheless, they walked through the castle gate only a moment ago.”

Kelly rushed out of the room to greet them. He saw them entering as he darted down the stairway to the main hall. They looked tired and much older than the last time he had seen them.

He clasped their hands. “It’s good to see you,” he said. “You’ve heard about what happened in London?”

Gabriella nodded.

“We must act fast,” Subhash said.

“Precisely what I’ve been thinking,” Kelly said.

“But how can we?” Gabriella slumped into a chair, despair etched into her pretty face. “We can fight them on the ground, but guerrilla warfare is little more than an annoyance to them. Their center of power is in that damned Mother Ship. We have one skyfighter to attack it with.”

Kelly looked at them both with something akin to amusement. “Come with me,” he said. “I’ve something to show the two of you.” Gabriella rose, and she and Subhash followed Kelly out into the courtyard. As they approached the canvas-covered objects against the ancient stone walls of Kramden Castle, Kelly brought them up to date.

“Sir has not returned,” he said. “I fear the Visitors found him out.”

Gabriella could not suppress a smile, even under the circumstances. Was it possible that even after Kelly had seen Lord Smythe-Walmsley on television he had failed to recognize him?

“But didn’t you see him on the telly?” asked Subhash. “He is Lord Smythe-Walmsley.”

“That wasn’t him,” Kelly said. “Sir may very well be Lord Smythe-Walmsley, but that was not Sir.”

“Who, then?”

“I don’t know . . . some alien trickery, brainwashing or black magic, I cannot tell you. I only know that there was something wrong with Sir.”

“How do you mean?” Gabriella asked, glad that the burden of Sir’s secret was no longer upon her.

“Sir would never turn about like that.”

“He would not be the first to turn against his country,” Subhash reminded him.

“No, no, didn’t you watch him? He was like a robot. That was not the Sir we know.”

Gabriella had suspected the same thing. A race centuries ahead of the Earth technologically could certainly deal with an intractable old man if they wanted to. But what had they done to poor Lord Smythe-Walmsley?

“Lads!” Kelly shouted. “Lend a hand with these ropes.”

Men emerged from the castle’s many doorways and began to help Kelly untie the ropes that held fast the canvases.

“What do you have?” Gabriella asked, hardly daring to hope that it was something they could use to effectively battle the Visitors. “What is it, Mr. Kelly?”

“You’ll see in a moment.”

The men peeled back the nearest canvas, revealing a gleaming white cone a few feet off the ground. As they continued to uncover it, Gabriella realized what it was with a thrill.

“Skyfighters!” she cried. “They’re sky-fighters!”

And indeed they were. She counted six in all, once the canvas wraps were removed. Now they really had something to fight the Visitors with —their own war machines!

“Seven altogether, counting the one you brought down yourself. Now, what do you think of that, lass?”

Gabriella embraced first Subhash and then Kelly. “We have a chance,” she cried. “We really have a chance.”

They all laughed and talked at once about the coming battle. All agreed that Gabriella was right. They had a chance. A slim one, but it was indeed a chance.

Chapter 34

Beverly oversaw the placing of the last few hundred prisoners in stasis pods personally. Two of the prisoners were to be brought to Medea as soon as the job was done.

Now Beverly walked through endless rows of veined transparent pods, pleased to see so many potential meals. They had acted very delicately with these English. It was about time some punitive action had been taken against them.

So much for Medea's theory about dealing with them psychologically. These creatures were incapable of simple logic. They would rather die than live in peace under Sirians.

So be it.

Medea had not completely failed her mission yet. That would take a little more work on her part. Beverly had to do nothing but wait for Medea to undo herself. And to think that Beverly

had first believed that she must plot against her superior.

Walking to the entrance of the gigantic stasis chamber, Beverly found a guard with two frightened male humans.

"Are these the two you are looking for?" the guard asked.

Beverly recognized one of them as Ian, the erstwhile leader of British Resistance. The other fit the description of the teacher who had been instrumental in the capture of Nigel Smythe-Walmsley.

"You are Robert Walters?" she asked.

"Yes," said a confused Robert. "Yes, I am."

"And you are Ian." She sized up the blond man.

Both men shrank from her gaze. They saw a huge, bipedal reptile, tongue snaking out of a fanged maw. Beverly saw no reason to wear a dermoplast pseudoskin any longer.

“You will both come with me,” she said. “The commander is waiting to see you.”

Ian and Robert glanced at each other. The fear in their eyes faded, and a slow smile broke out on Ian’s face. Robert began to smile, too. Incredibly, things were actually working out the way they had been told. He was safe here, far away from Gabriella and anyone else who might harm him.

The two men followed Beverly through lengthy corridors, seeing strange machinery and scarlet-uniformed, two-legged lizards everywhere. It was frightening, but exhilarating. They had come out of it unscathed, in spite of everything. And now they would reap the reward for their loyalty to the Visitors.

At last they emerged in a passageway before the cylindrical heart of the immense Mother Ship. A door slid open, and they entered. A number of Visitors were engaged in the **running** of the ship, several of them milling about. At a raised console at the center of the vast chamber was a thin Visitor wearing a female human disguise.

Beverly led them to her.

Medea finished what she was doing at the console and turned to look down on the two humans.

“Medea,” said Ian, “thank you.”

“Silence!” Medea hissed.

The two men cowered at her feet.

“So,” Medea said, “you are Robert Walters.” Robert nodded, not daring to speak.

“Is it true that you provided us with the information necessary to capture Nigel Smythe-Walmsley?”

Robert beamed. “Yes, it is.”

“For that we are grateful.”

“Why, thank you.” Robert could see that he had made the right decision. These creatures were about to welcome him with open arms. Perhaps they would even make him an important figure in the colonial government, once the violence was over with.

“Ian has kept us apprised of your activities,” said Medea,

“I’ve done my best,” Robert said modestly.

“So you have.” Medea leaned forward and glared at him. “But you also threatened to expose one of our agents, did you not?”

Robert said nothing. He glanced at Ian, who grinned back at him.

“I...” Robert found that he was tongue-tied. “Speak up,” Medea commanded, clearly relishing the game she was playing with Robert. “I couldn’t hear what you said.”

“I . . . was only saying that so Ian would see to it that I was protected from that madwoman Gabriella.”

“Indeed.”

“Yes.” A note of desperation crept into Robert’s voice. “Of course, I never actually intended to do anything of the kind.”

“It is all very well for you to say that, Mr. Walters, but how can we know that what you say is true?”

“Well, I didn’t tell them about Ian, did I?” He was shouting now, deathly afraid of what they might do to him. “I came here of my own free will, didn’t I?”

“Hardly.”

“Yes, of course I was sucked up into that frightful green beam along with everybody else . . . but I was there, waiting for you to take me aboard the London Mother Ship, just as you instructed. Do you think I would dare to come here if I intended to betray you?”

“Frankly, Mr. Walters, I don’t give a damn.” Robert, about to voice other arguments, realized that it was fruitless. This was not an English court of law. This creature would do with him whatever she wished.

“Do you have anything more to say?” she asked.

“No ... I ... I throw myself upon your mercy, Medea.”

Medea cast a mocking eye over the quivering Robert. “I think that we’ll have you for dinner.” Robert wiped the sweat from his face. “Oh, why, that, uh, that is very kind of you, Medea.” “You will be stringy, but perhaps a good cook can do something with you.”

Robert tried to laugh, but there was something in her voice that let him know she wasn’t joking. Instead of laughter, blubbing erupted from his throat.

“Take him away,” Medea said.

Chapter 35

The skyfighters were nearly ready. The men were loading antipersonnel weapons under the supervision of Alhazred. Everyone was anxious to get under way, after the long wait here at Kramden Castle. They might all die in the coming fight, but they would die willingly striking a blow for Earth.

“Who can fly them?” Gabriella asked. “It just occurred to me that it might be rather difficult to fly an alien craft.”

“Do you recall those Visitors whose lives you wanted me to spare?” Kelly said.

“Of course.”

“I learned the secret from them. Not much of a secret, really. Quite simple, actually.” Gabriella’s blood froze. Kelly’s implication was that he had never intended to let the prisoners live. He kept them around long enough to

learn how to fly the skyfighter and then killed them in cold blood. The man was every bit as evil as the Visitors themselves. Perhaps that was the reason he was able to fight them so effectively.

A few minutes later the skyfighters were ready. Everyone boarded in silence. Six men had secretly been taught how to fly the skyfighters. Kelly himself had given them lessons, and he now piloted the lead skyfighter.

Gabriella held her breath as they lifted off the ground. The visual scan showed the courtyard in three dimensions, shrinking as the turrets of the castle reared up. Then they were over the Irish Sea.

Kelly ran his hand over the console, and the skyfighter shot upward towards the sun.

“Have you disposed of that clone yet?” Medea demanded.

“Lord Smythe-Walmsley’s?” Beverly asked, chewing on a vole.

“Yes. I’ve come up with a use for it that never occurred to me when we first

created it.”

“I’ll have it brought here at once.” Beverly spoke to a guard, who instantly hurried off to do Medea’s bidding.

“I am going to have some fun with one of our prisoners,” Medea cackled.

Beverly said nothing. She knew that Medea wasn’t herself since the Westminster Abbey incident. The commander seemed to make much more of her failure as a propagandist than was necessary; now the English knew where they stood with her. Nevertheless, Medea had been in a foul mood and had indulged in a bit of sadism from time to time. She had even decided to break her fast by eating Robert Walters. It was decidedly unpleasant to be around her these days.

Well, perhaps Beverly would be invited to join in the feast. That would be some consolation.

The clone was brought to them, the poor creature still babbling on about the greatness of Britain and how the English people must cooperate with the Visitors. Its poor brain had been programmed with little else. A guard pushed it along, the clone shambling through the command center like a zombie.

Its shoulder was grasped to make it stop as it neared Medea’s elevated chair.

“What shall we do with it?” Beverly asked.

“Take it to Nigel Smythe-Walmsley’s cell. Torture it until you break Nigel’s spirit.”

Beverly was enthusiastic in spite of herself. “Brilliant! He’ll believe it’s his own father, and we’ll still have the old boy if we have any further need of him.”

“Precisely.” But Medea seemed to take little pleasure from her idea. She would have preferred to finesse the British with less sanguinary tactics.

“The feast is nearly ready,” she said bitterly. “We shall enjoy our food while we watch Nigel squirm.”

“Oh, how delightful!” Beverly squealed. “You really are a genius, Medea.”

Medea glanced at her keenly. Was Beverly serious? Did she really not understand the depth of Medea's failure? She had taken thousands of prisoners on the hoof, but she had failed to see that Kaspar was buried in Westminster Abbey. The British would never be subdued now. They would all have to be killed before they would capitulate. Beverly hadn't the faintest idea of how the human mind worked, it seemed.

Medea smiled wickedly, knowing that Beverly would fail even if she replaced her. It was not much of a consolation, but it was all she had today.

"Make ready the feast," Medea shouted. "We shall dine tonight on the flesh of a coward."

Everyone scurried to do her bidding.

"But what of the other one?" Beverly asked.

"Ian?" Medea hadn't thought of him.

"Yes, what of him?"

"He'll come to the feast, too, and watch us enjoy ourselves. How does that suit you, Beverly?"

Beverly clapped her clawed hands together at the prospect. At last they were going to have a good time.

"You will have them cook Robert in a sauce, won't you?" she pleaded with Medea. "A nice white-wine sauce would be wonderful."

"Yes, yes," Medea said impatiently. "Whatever you say, Beverly, just as long as he's prepared soon. I've gone without eating for far too long." Beverly smiled, thinking that she couldn't agree more. Then she ran off to oversee the preparation of the feast.

Chapter 36

Nigel awoke from a misty dream in strange hues. A familiar voice called out to him. Could it be Father again? He had been coming to see Nigel for a while, but he hadn't visited lately. Where could he have been? Nigel was beginning to feel as if Father didn't love him after all. He was reminded of the time Father had missed his birthday party when he was seven.

Nigel peered through the mist at a figure standing on the threshold. His eyes were watery, and yet he was quite certain he knew who it was. It actually appeared to be Father.

"Father, how have you been?" he asked gently. "I've missed you very much."

Father said nothing. He seemed to be looking right through Nigel, as if he were blind.

"Is there something wrong, Father?"

The simulacrum of Lord Smythe-Walmsley

slowly turned its head and listened. Nigel wondered what it was, and then he heard it, too. Footsteps—booted footsteps—coming down the corridor.

Two lizardmen burst into the room. They wore red uniforms and jackboots, and they hurled Father against the wall as if he were a sack of flour. He groaned and sagged to the floor, still conscious.

"What are you doing?" Nigel screamed.

The lizardmen ignored him and picked Father up again. Where had he seen them before, these monsters? Were they real? Was any of this happening? He didn't know. All he knew was that his father had come to him and these creatures were here trying to kill him.

Nigel struggled to get off his bed. It took all his strength to raise himself up, and in the meantime the lizardmen were doing terrible things to Father. Where was his strength? Why did he find it so difficult to move?

But at last he managed to prop himself against the wall. The lizardmen were so preoccupied with brutalizing Father that they didn't see him. He could see blood running down Father's face. He had to hurry.

Nigel stood on wobbling legs and propelled himself shakily through the coloured mist. He charged at the nearest Visitor. **Visitor!**

He remembered what these creatures were as he crashed into one of them. His quixotic charge had little effect on the alien. It turned and backhanded him across the room. Nigel collapsed in a heap in the corner, light motes shimmering in his field of vision.

When he could see again, he realized that they were still working on Father. One of them had swatted him as if he were a fly and they had returned to their beastly business.

Father screamed like a wounded animal.

Nigel looked around him for a weapon. There was nothing in the room that could do any damage to these creatures. Then he saw that the bed was fastened to the wall with struts.

He pushed the bed against the wall and tried to force it into a position where the struts would break. It was tremendously taxing, but he put every bit of strength into it. He had to, before they killed Father.

There. Part of the bed fell to the floor with a thud. Nigel tore apart the broken bed until he came up with a section of the underpinning that he could swing.

He lunged across the room and brought the bed strut down sharply on the crown of a Visitor's skull.

The other one was so preoccupied with torturing Father that it never saw its companion fall. Nor did it see Nigel remove the laser pistol from the holster.

The second Visitor raised a bloody, dripping claw to strike another blow when a

beam of blue death burned through its body. Its black reptilian eyes were startled as it stood, still poised to strike for a moment, and then slowly toppled to the floor.

Father fell beside the dead Visitor, and Nigel rushed to his side.

“Father,” he said, “are you all right?”

The older man looked at him uncomprehend-ingly, as Nigel lifted his head and stroked it.

“Britain must bow to a superior culture,” Father said. “Must bow to a superior culture. Must bow to a superior culture.”

What had they done to him? Not only was he brainwashed, but he repeated himself as if he were a stuck record.

Father stopped talking, and his head lolled to one side.

He was dead.

“No.” Nigel held his father’s head to his chest, weeping. He remembered that day long ago when he had stayed alone on his birthday, hurt that Father was not there. But now that he was in trouble, Father had come and given his life for him.

The door whooshed open, and Visitors began to pour into the room. Nigel turned and fired, dropping the first one at the doorway. The second fell over the gasping body, and Nigel burned a hole in the head of the third.

“You bloody reptiles!” he shouted. “You call yourselves a superior race! You’re nothing but a

lot of filthy barbarians!”

He fired as he screamed at them, making every shot count. The Visitors outside the cell couldn’t see him to get a clear shot, and the bodies piling up on the threshold prevented them from entering quickly. Nigel had plenty of time to shoot before they could get inside and get their bearings.

The Visitors drew back, leaving the young man with the corpse of what he thought to be his father. They had intended to destroy any strength he had left. Instead, they had brought it forth.

“Come on!” Nigel shouted. “Come on and take what’s coming to you, you vile lizards!”

None of them were eager to take up his challenge.

Chapter 37

“What do they think they’re doing?” Medea shrieked. She and the rest of the Mother Ship’s officers watched through a two-way transparency while they dined. From where they sat, Nigel’s back was to them, and the door to his cell was almost at a right angle. They watched the bodies pile up and cursed the guards for the cowards they were.

“Even drugged, he’s more than a match for them.” Medea fairly spat the words. “Perhaps we can pump some other gas into that cell —something to knock him out.”

Beverly clapped her greasy hands. She chewed on an appetizer. The main course had just been brought out when the tables had turned on the guards beating the Lord Smythe-Walmsley clone. Robert Walters looked quite enticing with an apple in his mouth.

An alarm sounded through the ship. It was the general alarm, a sound none of them had heard since their training. It meant the Mother Ship was being attacked!

Beverly sighed, wondering if they would ever get a chance to sample Robert Walters in a white-wine sauce. She glanced at Ian, who had been forced to sit at the banquet by Medea in an effort to teach him his place. The former resistance leader looked very frightened, as well he might. For all he knew, he might end up as tomorrow’s dinner.

But what was this nonsense about the ship being attacked? It was absurd. The Earth had no facilities for such a reprisal. Most likely, it was only a terrorist who had stowed away by flying into the Mother Ship aboard a skyfighter, as the infamous Mike Donovan had done in America on more than one occasion. He would be dealt with quickly, Beverly was sure.

Klaxons were blaring throughout the ship now. Soldiers ran in every direction, lasers at the ready. Even those outside Nigel Smythe-Walmsley’s cell had joined the repellent force that hurried towards the docking bay where the skyfighter must have come in. Medea was gone, overseeing the soldiers massing against the

intruder. Well, perhaps she should join in the fun, too. Medea might make an issue of it if she didn't.

As she started moving towards the nearest corridor, she heard Ian calling to her.

"What about me?" he said.

"What about you?"

"You can't leave me alone without a weapon. Nigel is armed in there. He might come out and kill me."

"Nonsense. He's still drugged. He'll stay in there mewling over that clone until we get back. "

With that, a door slid shut behind her, and she was gone.

Ian was left alone in the banquet room. It wasn't really a banquet room, of course. They had brought the food in so they could watch Nigel agonize over the killing of his father, the sadistic bastards. He could stay in here and watch Nigel, who couldn't see him through the transparency. Nigel would never even know he was aboard the Mother Ship.

Nigel was kneeling over the body of the clone, looking so shattered that Ian almost wished that he could tell him it wasn't really his father at all. But no, he might get shot if he tried to be charitable at this late date.

He had better stay put.

Now Nigel seemed to be looking straight at him. The rage and despair in his face was disheartening. He would not think twice of shooting Ian if he had any idea of who had sold him out. But he might not know, Ian reminded himself. It was entirely possible that Nigel didn't have any idea of how the aliens had got hold of him.

Ian could swear that Nigel was staring at him through the glass, his sweating face grimly set. Ian backed away from the transparency, wondering if Medea had been mistaken. Perhaps Nigel could see him after all.

He stumbled into something behind him. Turning, Ian saw what it was in horror.

His hand was on the banquet table where a huge silver platter rested. There, under glass, was the cooked body of Robert, floating in a white sauce.

Ian gasped. He backed away as if he faced death himself. The sight of Robert with an apple in his mouth was the most ghastly thing he had ever seen in his entire life. Was this the fate that was in store for him, too? Good God, he had to get out of here. Ian wasn't half so terrifying as this. How could he have helped these monsters? He held his hand over his mouth to prevent himself from gagging.

"I've got to get out of here." He turned towards the door. Perhaps he could join the intruders, whoever they were. Nobody had known about his allegiance to the Visitors except Robert, and look where Robert was now.

How would he explain his presence aboard the Mother Ship to them? Of course, he would say he had been captured along with Nigel. No, that was no good. Nigel would tell them otherwise.

He had been captured by the tractor beam during the demonstration at Westminster, just as it had really happened.

Yes, the closer his story was to the truth, the more convincing it would sound. Now to get out of this dreadful place and join the rebels.

He ran to the door, expecting it to **whoosh** open. Nothing happened. He almost collided with the unmoving portal.

There must be something to open it with, a latch or lock or ... or something. He searched frantically for that something, but the door and the wall around it were featureless.

Perhaps there was something on the console. He went to it and ran his hands over it frantically, but nothing happened. He tried different combinations of the brightly lit rectangular buttons, but still nothing happened. He tried everything he could think of, but all he heard were the sounds of fighting coming from behind the walls.

He slammed his fist down on the console in despair. Beverly had locked him in.

He felt Robert's dead eyes fixed on him and he turned away from the table.

Nigel stared through the transparent wall.

Spinning around, holding his head in his hands, Ian screamed until he thought his lungs would burst. And then he screamed again . . . and again . . . and again . . .

Chapter 38

Gabriella knelt behind an enormous liquid fuel hose, firing a laser pistol at the surging mass of crimson uniforms. The Visitors had responded much more quickly than they had expected, but they had ill chosen their plan of attack in their haste.

They were bottlenecked at the entrances to the skyfighter docking bay. There were three entrances in all, and there were ten resistance fighters firing at those coming through each entrance. Not a single Visitor had made it into the bay alive. There were a lot more lizards than there were humans, however. They would drop back soon and devise another plan.

Alhazred fought beside her, actually wearing a burnoose. He squeezed his shots methodically into the cowering Visitors at the central entrance to the docking bay. Blue firebolts criss-

crossed the empty space between the skyfighters and the passageways, the smell of burning plastic in the air.

“Cover me,” the Arab said.

Gabriella was amazed, but she did as she was told as Alhazred suddenly leaped from behind cover and dashed towards the enemy. He held his laser pistol in one hand and an explosive in the other.

Laser beams focused on his darting figure, but Alhazred kept moving. He seemed to fear nothing. Perhaps he thought of this as *jihad*, the Muslim holy war. He would be with Allah if he died here today.

Incredibly, none of the laser fire hit him. He ran straight at the Visitors and hurled the bomb at them. They stared at the device at their feet, tongues lashing as they hissed in fear.

“Allah Akbar!” Alhazred shouted. He turned and ran back towards cover.

The Visitors were so confused they didn't shoot for a moment. When they lifted their lasers to fire, the bomb exploded, orange fire obscuring them for an instant before their bodies began to fly in all directions.

Alhazred sprinted across the open area, still shouting to Allah, when a blue beam from one of the other passageways began to follow him.

"Alhazred!" Gabriella cried, trying to warn him.

She was looking right into his bearded face when the beam found him, burning through the purity of his white robe. His face was composed, but he stopped running and looked down at the smoking hole in his burnoose.

"Allah ..." he said, and keeled over.

For a moment, the volume of laser fire decreased on the side of the resistance. Smoke wafted over the body of Alhazred as if in benediction.

"Come on, lads!" Kelly bellowed. He stood and fired, running towards the central passageway.

Thirty men and women followed him. In seconds they were across the docking bay and at the mouth of the central passageway, driving the enemy back.

Gabriella knew that there was a warren of such passageways throughout the ship. Hundreds of miles in which to bedevil the Visitors with guerrilla acts. She fired into the retreating red-clad soldiers ahead of her, seeing one fall after another before the IRA's onslaught.

The IRA continued to toss bombs ahead of them, the fire burning some of the lizards alive, while the smoke made their human attackers into invisible targets. Nevertheless, a few resistance fighters were hit. Their agonized cries rose out of the smoke and fire like the voices of the damned in hell.

Subhash was at her side. "Behind you, Gabriella," he said.

She turned to see red-uniformed attackers rushing in behind them. They would have to be dealt with now, for the resistance fighters had not yet come to a junction of corridors where they would be able to split up. There were aliens on either side of them.

Subhash fired at them, as did another four or five IRA men. It wasn't enough, and the Visitors behind them were drawing fire that could be directed at the force ahead of them.

"Quick, a bomb!" Gabriella cried.

Kelly turned, an incendiary device in his hand. Suddenly he looked startled. Clutching his belly, he dropped the bomb and fell to the floor, writhing horribly. A smouldering hole showed in his jacket.

Subhash dived after the bomb as it slid across the corridor. Blue beams sought him, but they missed. Subhash propped himself up on one elbow and tossed the bomb.

It landed in the midst of the Visitors, exploding instantly in a brilliant orange flower of fire.

The explosion gave them the extra time they needed. En masse, the resistance force charged ahead, easily reaching a junction of corridors. They ran in both directions, turning to fire at the pursuing aliens as they sprinted into the bowels of the ship.

When they came to another branching corridor, they divided their forces again. And at the next, yet again. At last Gabriella and Subhash found themselves alone, running down one of

the ship's interminable corridors.

"Watch out for stragglers," Gabriella said.

"Right." As he ran, Subhash pointed, indicating that they should turn right at the next junction. They did so, and were confronted with a lone Visitor, just as Gabriella had anticipated.

It was a bloated female alien wearing no human disguise. Her tongue flicked in and out in rage as she was confronted by the two humans.

"Throw down your weapon," Subhash commanded her.

The alien's right claw was on her laser, but it was still in its holster.

“I wouldn’t try anything if I were you,” Gabriella warned, pointing her laser at the monster’s breast.

The alien drew her pistol out slowly and let it drop to the floor, where it clattered noisily.

“Now kick it towards me,” Gabriella said.

Sighing, Beverly did as she was told.

Chapter 39

“She looks like a pretty high-ranking officer,” Gabriella said. “She’ll make a useful prisoner.”

“Yes,” Subhash agreed. “A fine bargaining chip if we need one.”

“You’re Gabriella,” the lizardwoman rasped. “Yes, and you’re dead if you make one false move,” Gabriella assured her.

“I will take you to Nigel Smythe-Walmsley,” Beverly said, “if you will let me go.”

“What kind of trick are you trying to play?” Gabriella demanded angrily. “Nigel is dead.” “No, no. ” Beverly held out her hands in supplication as Gabriella’s gun barrel waved menacingly in her face. “It was only a clone. Medea used an informer in the resistance to capture him.”

“Ian,” said Subhash.

“Yes, Ian. I’ll turn him over to you, too, if you’ll just let me go.”

“Take us to them.”

Beverly led them to the door of Nigel’s cell in minutes. “The last time I saw him he was in there.”

Subhash held a laser on Beverly while Gabriella climbed over a heap of Visitor bodies and looked inside.

Nigel lay on the floor, cradling a dead man in his arms. She could not see the

corpse's face.

"Nigel," she said in disbelief.

Slowly, the man she loved turned his head. His eyes were bloodshot, and he seemed confused, but recognition gradually dawned.

"Gabby," he said. "Can it be?"

"Oh, darling." She went to him, and it was only then that she saw the dead man's face.

"It's my father," Nigel said. "They killed him."

"Oh, Nigel, I'm so sorry." She embraced him, hot tears rolling down her cheeks and dampening his collar.

"Subhash is here," Gabriella said after a moment.

"Subhash ... I didn't know you two were acquainted."

"Yes, we are," Subhash said from the doorway. For just a second, he took his eyes off Beverly. At that moment she spat at him, venom striking him full in the face.

Subhash gagged and dropped his laser. He fell to the floor gasping as Beverly ran her claws across the analyser on the outside of the door. As the door slid open, she leaped inside and closed it behind her. Only an authorized clawprint could open that door. She was safe in here.

Outside the banquet chamber, Subhash breathed his last with Gabriella and Nigel bending over him.

"She poisoned him," Nigel said. "I've seen it before."

Gabriella wept. "He was my friend," she said.

"And mine," said Nigel. "A braver man I've never known."

They both stood over Subhash's body and leveled their lasers at the door.

Things were going very badly, Medea realized. How could this have happened? A handful of rebels from Earth were turning her ship inside out. It didn't seem possible and yet it was happening.

It looked as if she would be forced to abandon ship if this kept up. After all, her life was more important than a mere ship's existence. Let the rebels have it if they must; she was going to get out of here.

Chaos was all round her. Smoke roiled through the Mother Ship's passageways as she searched for a way to the skyfighter docking bay without running into any hostile rebels. She knew a way that passed through the life-support system. If she could get to a vent without being apprehended, there was a chance.

She turned a corner and nearly ran into two Irishmen carrying Uzis. With a single sweep of her laser, she dispatched both of them before either could get off a shot. A moment later she crawled inside a vent and was making her way towards the docking bay. They would never find her in here. Now, if she could just get into a skyfighter without being seen, she had a chance. The fighting and commotion were on her side. Nobody would expect a lone Visitor to fly out in a skyfighter.

Twin laser beams burned through the metal of the banquet chamber door. Sparks flew and molten steel dripped as the seams grew white hot. In a moment nothing would stand between Gabriella and Nigel and the Visitor who had killed Subhash.

The door fell from its jambs with a resounding crash. Gabriella and Nigel stepped over it and went inside the smoke-filled room.

A figure emerged from the smoke. Gabriella pointed her laser at it, but as it drew closer she saw that it was not Beverly. It was human.

"Ian!" Nigel said.

Strangely, Ian did not reply. He didn't even look at Nigel. Instead, he cackled hideously. In his hand was a strangely shaped knife, covered with blood.

"He betrayed you," Gabriella said. "I think he and Robert Walters were in it together."

“Robert,” said Ian. His eyes grew wide.

“What about Robert?” Nigel asked.

Ian turned and pointed through the smoke at a table that could be half seen through the haze. Nigel and Gabriella approached it, nearly stumbling over something on the floor.

It was Beverly’s dead body.

“She shouldn’t have left me alone,” Ian said. “Not here.”

They saw then what was on the table.

“It’s Robert,” Gabriella said. “They’ve made a meal of him.”

“Yes,” said Ian, holding up the bloody carving knife, “but he got cold when they all went off to fight. Beverly never should have left me alone with him.”

Gabriella and Nigel both realized the truth in what he said as he began to laugh again, a hideous keening wail of a laugh that knew no pleasure, only madness.

EPILOGUE

Gabriella stood outside the enormous stasis chamber, while the survivors of the battle forced their prisoners to free the captives held in veined, transparent pods.

Nigel appeared in a doorway and crossed a catwalk to speak to her. “Apparently Medea escaped,” he said. “During all the confusion, she boarded a skyfighter and piloted it herself. We picked it up on the ship’s sensors, but it was too late to stop her.”

Gabriella shook her head regretfully. “She’s probably aboard the Paris Mother Ship by this time.”

They both watched as newly awakened human captives were ushered out of the stasis chamber. Now there were many more humans to handle the Visitor prisoners and to learn about the great London Mother Ship. It would be an invaluable

weapon in the seemingly endless battle against the Visitors, this mighty spacecraft.

Nigel turned away from the pleasant scene below them.

“What is it, Nigel darling?” Gabriella asked tenderly.

“I can’t forget that I saw Father die and was powerless to stop it.”

“I’m feeling rather chipper for a dead man.” It was a familiar voice that came from behind them.

They both turned in amazement to see Lord Smythe-Walmsley standing before them.

“Father!” Nigel gaped.

“You recognized me.” He reached out to shake his son’s hand.

“Is it really you?” Nigel asked.

“Yes, and none the worse for my captivity.” Lord Smythe-Walmsley smiled.

“You see, my boy, they made a clone of me with which to fool you.”

Weeping, Nigel embraced his father.

“I’ve come to take you home, son,” Lord Smythe-Walmsley said. “Both of you.” He hugged Gabriella.

“It’s a wonderful idea,” she said, “but there’s a war to fight now, Sir.”

“Yes, there is, dear Gabriella, but it will keep for a little while.” He looked at her soberly. “At least until the two of you are married.”

All three of them embraced then, joyfully.